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BITHA'S WONDERFUL YEAR

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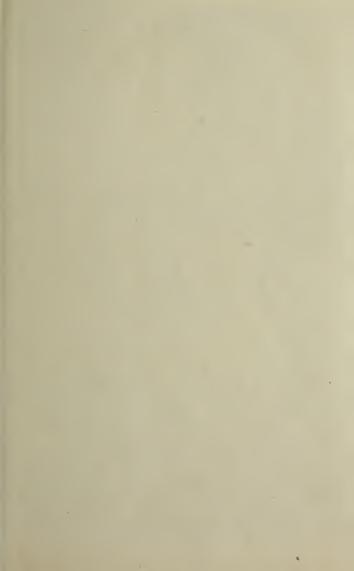
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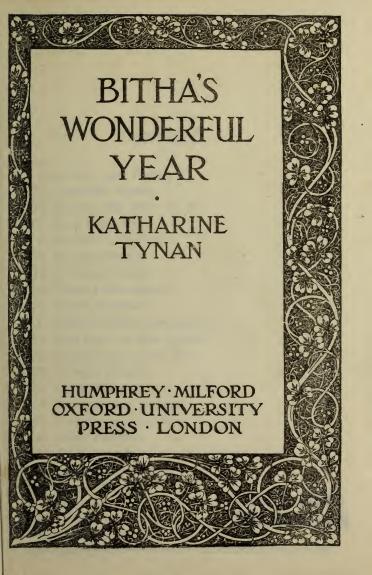
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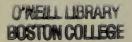




"BUT IT WAS NOT PAPA WHO CAME IN."



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CHAPTER I

OUT ON THE WORLD

BITHA—otherwise Elizabeth—O'Grady looked up at her Uncle William through a shower of red curls, with eyes as beseeching as her own red setter's and just the faintest touch of mutiny about her lips.

Something in her eyes touched the practical matter-of-fact heart of William Orme. After all, she was a soft thing. Lady Orme was cold and conventional. She had helped her husband steadily up the ladder of success. Their daughter Rosamund was very like her mother, and Cynthia affected an indifferent boyish manner, which had an air of defiance about it. For a moment William Orme had a vision of a little daughter as soft as Bitha—something to lie warm against the heart of an adoring father.

He repressed the vision sternly. Cynthia and Rosamund were satisfactory daughters

enough: he was fond of Cynthia in an undemonstrative way, and there was always Jim. This child looking at him through the clusters of red curls was her father's daughter. He wondered for the hundredth time why a sister of his should have married Hercules O'Grady. Well, poor girl, she had paid for her folly. That ramshackle life at Castle O'Grady must have been a secret, sore trial to one accustomed to English order and comfort. She had kept a stiff upper lip about it. He remembered the last time he had seen her, when she had told him that as far as money matters went things were pretty desperate at Castle O'Grady. That mirage of the sale of three townlands to the Congested Districts Board was as far off as ever from becoming a reality. Yet she had looked at him defiantly, while she said that she had had a happy life—a very happy life; that she would not have changed with any woman on earth.

Odd, that infatuation of hers for Hercules O'Grady, who had let the world slip through his fingers! William Orme's relations with his wife were, he would have said, based on mutual respect and confidence. Alice had kept him up to it. She would not have been satisfied with a man who was a failure in life. She had stood behind a good many of his hard dealings. She was behind him now in the spirit as he catechised Bitha.

"The time has come," he said, "when you will have to set to and work. You must look facts in the face, Bitha. There can be no more idleness for you, my child. You must leave this draughty, rheumatic place, which is crippling your father before his time. A miserable place!"

He looked disparagingly down the long, double drawing-room of Castle O'Grady. It was the rainy season, and the soft clinging mist came in through the open windows. The room was not damp. They had still plenty of fuel at Castle O'Grady, plenty of turf and wood, and both fireplaces were heaped recklessly. But the damp was in the house. Winter after winter the Atlantic gales swept the slates off the roof of the high, exposed building. Peter Walsh, the handy-man on the estate, had spent a good part of the Spring, year after year, sitting on the roof, mending the slates. But Peter Walsh had died two winters ago, and there had been none to take his place. In the flagged passages of the basement the damp oozed between the stones. Everything went mouldy in the fireless rooms.

A wretched, mouldering old place, William Orme, fresh from the ordered comfort of Queen's Gate, pronounced it, and pitied his poor sister.

"I should have advised you to scrap the

place, Bitha," he said, "selling the furniture for what it would fetch. Those chandeliers, and that cabinet, and the silver and china, would bring something at Christie's. There is a lot of good furniture in the house. But --- " he was uneasily conscious of the soft eyes-"seeing your inexplicable passion for the place, and your father's—I don't understand the Irish, I must confess—you had perhaps better accept the offer of those Americans to take the house furnished. The rent they offer will just pay off the interest on the loans and the jointures for your aunts. You had better come to London-not to Queen's Gate-we are unfortunately full at this time. Lady Orme will find something for you and your father. He can have treatment for that old wound of his; and we will find you something to do that will not be too much for you."

He ended on a note of tenderness, forgetting all Alice's instructions about being firm with Bitha and her father.

"Oh, thank you so much, Uncle William," said Bitha. She had been desperately frightened by his first suggestion of selling Castle O'Grady for what it would fetch. And he was helping her in his way—going through papers, smoothing out what had seemed an inextricable coil. Uncle William was such a very busy man,

with his railway contracts and shipping interests and all the rest, that to give so much time to his reckless brother-in-law's business was a great concession in itself. It was something Lady Orme had not approved. Vaguely Bitha appreciated the fact that at the back of Uncle William's hardness, which had melted so fast, stood Lady Orme.

Again Sir William had to repress himself sharply, because of that ridiculous desire for a daughter other than his own creditable girls. He had an absurd memory of Rosamund at eight years old snubbing a kind farm-woman who had tried to slip a ripe pear into the pocket of her coat. "The pear might ferment and spoil my coat," said Rosamund, to whom someone had been explaining the process of fermentation a day or two earlier. Rosamund had always been as sharp as a needle, and as pricking. Cynthia, for all her affectation of indifference to softness and what she would have called sentimentality, was much nearer her father's heart

"You won't find London so bad," he said, with that unwonted softening about his heart. "There'll be always me, and . . . and . . . your Aunt Alice, and . . . of course Rosamund: and there'll be Jim in the vacations. You'll like Cynthia. But they are very busy. They belong

to all sorts of clubs and things,—going from morning till night, you know. Still, it won't be like being alone in London. And now tell me, Bitha,"—he had a sudden idea that Alice might be a harsher catechist than he—" what can you do?"

He had not seen Bitha since she was a child; and he remembered her as a lovely child. He conceded that at almost seventeen she was lovely still. Her features were all wrong according to strict canons of beauty. Her mouth was too wide; her nose was turned up; but she had a wild-rose complexion and she was as shy as a fawn when she looked at him. He said to himself shrewdly that perhaps Alice and Rosamund would not see Bitha as he did. Cynthia would not dislike another girl for her beauty, but he had an idea that Rosamund might be different.

"I can arrange flowers, Uncle William," said Bitha.

He thought it a very childish answer. Given by another he might have snapped, but the longer he talked to Bitha the softer he grew. It struck him how ridiculous it was that he should be here in the West of Ireland, talking trivialities with this child, at a moment when he should be lobbying for all he was worth to get the Bill through for his latest railway.

"That won't carry you very far," he said,

trying to be gruff and obviously failing. He really must keep away from Bitha if she was going to have such an extraordinary effect upon him. Not that he altogether disliked the odd soft feeling.

"I can make my own clothes and I can knit and spin. I can break a horse, Tim Langan says as well as himself; and I know all about dogs. I nursed Patsy through distemper when the vet. said there was nothing to be done but shoot her."

Sir William Orme positively smiled. It was what a small American boy had once described as a tough smile, but it made him look a bit more human, and Bitha looked up at him hopefully. She was sitting at a table where she had been making a drawing when he had come in and taken the chair by the side of the hearth. His big iron-grey head rested against the shabby cushions, which were, however, very comfortable. The best of goose-feathers had gone to the stuffing of those cushions. He sat with his back to the light, which was directed full on Bitha's head and the drooping curls. He had an irrational desire to pull one of Bitha's curls to its full length and let it spring back again.

It was very unlike Rosamund's smooth fair head and Cynthia's bobbed straightness. The curls ran round Bitha's small head from the crown to the forehead as in an angel of Filippino Filippi. A blue ribbon strayed somewhere through the curls, but if it was intended to confine them it had failed, for the rings and clusters fell about Bitha's face. Now and again she put up a small brown hand to push them back, with little effect.

"No talent for governessing, Bitha? No accomplishments? Horses and dogs are all very well, you know, but you can hardly look for employment in a stable or a kennel. Some ladies are doing it now, but your Aunt Alice

would not approve."

Bitha listened meekly. If, in her own mind, she wondered what Aunt Alice had to do with it, the question did not rise to her lips. She was feeling much less afraid of her Uncle William than she had been at the beginning of the interview.

"I've no accomplishments at all, Uncle William," she said mournfully. "You see, I couldn't leave Papa to go to school. Mr. Kearney, the National School teacher, taught me a few mathematics—I'm no good at them and Papa taught me some Greek and Latin, and we've read a lot together; but I don't think I am fit for a governess. I can trim hats too. But I really think I am best at arranging flowers. Old Miss Bodkin who lives at Mount Creyke says I should make my fortune at arranging flowers and decorating dinner- and supper-tables."

"What a mad idea!"

Sir William Orme glanced round the room. He was suddenly aware, though he would hardly have discovered it for himself, that there were tall pitchers and vases everywhere, full of autumn leaves and berries.

They had a strange, glowing effect in the room. He realized now that they had made an illusory sunshine so that he had forgotten the wet morning out-of-doors and the heavy clouds. It had rained on end for several days.

He wondered what Alice would think of the notion. If the girl could do so much with wet autumn branches and berries, what could she not do with the florist's shop at her command? The tall pitchers and pots of grey-blue and brass were reflected in the long mirrors which ran down the room. The cut glass drops of the chandelier were pinky-gold from the reflection. Somehow Bitha's curls and her eyes were in the picture. They were the very colour of the Autumn leaves.

After all, there might be something in it. It seemed a ridiculous thing by which to make one's living. Alice would scout it, he knew. Alice's suggestion for Bitha had been that,

after a preliminary training she might act as a sort of sewing-maid to her cousins. It was not very helpful. Sir William did not see Bessie's child earning her bread by stitching for her more fortunate relatives. And, of course, her father would need her.

He had an idea too that Rosamund, at least, might not care for her mother's scheme—not if it involved the presence of Bitha in the house; and she could scarcely be sent to the servants' hall for her meals.

He would talk to Mrs. Pendray about Bitha. She was a good soul, despite her riches. Better see Mrs. Pendray first before Alice had time to throw cold water on the scheme.

"What will you do with the dogs?" he asked. "No place for dogs in London, you know, Bitha."

"I will take Patsy, Uncle William. Patsy would fret to death if I was to leave her. Mrs. Paul Potter said she would keep Sheila, who requires more exercise than I could give her in London, and the terriers. The horses are too old to be moved. I could not leave Patsy."

Sir William Orme looked at the tiny mongrel which lay in the chair opposite to them, listening and looking from one to another with bright enquiring eyes from under the ragged hair.

"I daresay Patsy will miss the country," he said He remembered days when he had

hardly thought life possible without a dog. Now he had grown used to Alice's ban upon dogs in the house, and was satisfied to have his sporting dogs kept in the country. "If you must have a dog in town, Patsy will be as little objectionable and out of place as any dog could be in London."

"We might be coming back, Uncle William," Bitha said wistfully—she had picked up Patsy and was holding her close against her breast. "The Board might find the money to pay. Wasn't it sad they just stopped short of Farrakelly, Farrafore and Farragolden, and they wanting the land too?"

"I wouldn't think too much about that if I were you," William Orme said not unkindly. "It won't help you to put your shoulder to the wheel. When a thing has been hanging on so long as the sale of the town-lands and nothing comes of it, I should give it up as lost."

Bitha shook her head. The mirage of the sale of the lands still beckoned her although it receded. Of course she hated losing the lands, but the people needed them,—and,—so much could be done with the money. But perhaps Uncle William was right. Perhaps the Board would never find the money that would save Castle O'Grady and keep Bitha and her father at home.

CHAPTER II

THE NEW HOUSE

Three months from that day saw Hercules O'Grady and his daughter established in Melisande Road, Fulham. They had arrived in the late afternoon after a long and tiresome journey from the West of Ireland, with more luggage than it seemed possible Tempe, as the house called itself, could contain; but Chris, the little maid they had brought all the way with them, a soldier's daughter, had a capacity, probably inherited, for stowing away many things in a small space.

"It isn't to say roomy—not after Castle O'Grady, Miss Bitha," she said, cheerfully, "but all the same it's a grand little place for conthrivances. There's the natest little scullery you ever saw, Miss, an' a dresser built into the wall, an' hot and cold water everywhere, and the little shiny taps o' the bathroom would take the sight out o' your eyes, they're that bright."

Tempe, indeed, new from the hands of the builder, put a deceitful best foot foremost. The rooms were tiny and built at all manner of impossible angles. There was not a square room in the house. But that fact prevented comparison with the vast roominess of Castle O'Grady. The flowery papers, the little balconies with window-doors opening upon them, the electric light, the "ingle-nook" in the drawing-room, had all a spurious prettiness. That first evening, when Bitha was sad at heart and could hardly keep back her tears till she could weep them to herself, Tempe presented a not uncomfortable face.

It was furnished. Lady Orme had found Tempe and furnished it cheaply from a local furnishing company, but, at least, the things were clean and new, and, when they had put out various precious *bibelots* brought from Castle O'Grady, the rooms would lose something of their gimerack air.

Another comfortable discovery was that the larder was stocked. They had arrived on a Saturday evening, quite oblivious of the fact that Sunday would not be a marketing day. Castle O'Grady had provided itself, except for the groceries: and it was only Chris, who, as they approached Euston, had had misgivings which she kept to herself as to whether there would be any food in the house.

There was a generosity in the stocking of the larder which showed another hand than Lady Orme's. Someone had remembered that girls like sweet things, and there was a plentiful provision of such in the rows of jars and tins and bottles and pots, of one kind or another, which had come from Fortnum and Mason's.

The hardest man or woman may have a soft spot somewhere, and Bitha had found Uncle William's soft spot. Perhaps, indeed, Uncle William was only encrusted over and soft enough under the shell. Perhaps he had made the mistake of his life when he had married the rich city man's daughter, as a stepping-stone to wealth and position. Perhaps Bitha had begun already to break through the crust of worldly selfishness which had all but enclosed him.

There was a stiff, kind, little note lying on the pantry shelf by the serried rows of dainties.

"My dear Bitha,—Your aunt has chosen the house and the furniture. I hope you will not feel it too cramped while you are finding your way. I have sent in a few things that may prevent the necessity of marketing for the moment. Accept them with my love.

Your aunt would, I know, like to see you and

your father to-morrow afternoon, if you are free and inclined to come and make better acquaintance with your cousins.

I hope you and your father have borne the

journey well.

Your affectionate Uncle,

WILLIAM 'ORME."

Somehow this kindness of Uncle William's brought Bitha's tears which had been threatening all day; but they were soft comfortable tears which did not hurt her.

Uncle William had been very good. He had not forgotten a box of cigars for Bitha's Papa, and a case of wine. For quite a long time now Hercules O'Grady had been cutting out wine and cigars, and he had missed them. He drank his light wines like a Frenchman, having spent some years of his boyhood in Languedoc with an aunt who had married a Frenchman.

Bitha wanted to run and tell Papa how kind Uncle William had been. The prosperous, successful man of business had been rather a bogey to Hercules O'Grady, an old soldier, who had commanded a battalion of the Munsters in the South African War. The battalion was very proud of its Colonel. He had always led where they followed and he had loved the men like his children. He was a very fine, heroic, old fighting man, and his medals and orders

might make any man lift his hat to him; but he had been wont to say that in William Orme's presence, still more in Lady Orme's, he felt an old wastrel, just an old wastrel.

Bitha took care to dry her eyes before she went to tell her father the pleasant tidings. Indeed in the matter of her eyes she might have counted on deceiving Hercules O'Grady, whose sight was rather feeble. It was her voice she had to guard against.

She went into the little sitting-room, where she found him sitting disconsolately in front of a gas-fire, stroking Patsy who was lying on his knee.

"I don't like this thing at all, Bitha," he said. "It only pretends to be a fire. It reminds me too painfully that we have left Castle O'Grady."

"I daresay we can get it taken away, darling," Bitha said, stooping to kiss his cheek. "We shall see about it on Monday."

Chris put in her head, with an easy intimacy, to say that there was a ton of coal in the cellar, a brace of pheasants in "the natest little wire cage you ever seen, outside"; with eggs and bacon and cheese, and, moreover, that somebody hadn't forgotten the bread and milk and butter.

While she held the door open they could hear

the sound of a spluttering grill in the little kitchen, and smell a savoury smell which made Patsy prick up her ears and turn her head on one side, asking a question.

Chris, having imparted her information breathlessly, closed the door and went off again, while Bitha got her father into a more comfortable chair, found his slippers, and bid him not to change for the evening-meal, as his clothes were not yet unpacked. At the last injunction Hercules O'Grady demurred.

"I shall feel an outsider," he said. "My old grandmother, when I was taken to see her, at ten years old, and she ninety-five, gave me a fivepound note and two bits of advice. 'Always say your prayers, Hercules, my boy, and always dress for dinner.' I've followed her advice except when I've been campaigning. I remember in the Soudan, when we had a forced march through the desert on a pint of water a day, I managed to shave every day. So did most of the officers. Well, I suppose I can have a wash. I have not yet explored this little rat-trap, Bitha."

"Come and see," said Bitha, leading the way to the bathroom, with its lavatory basin, where the wonderful Chris had already laid out clean towels, sponges, and a cake of Colleen soap.

"There's plenty of hot water," said Bitha.

"We shan't have the whole household running with kettles of water as we had at Castle O'Grady when one wanted a hot bath. That is one thing Tempe scores in."

She closed the door and left him. She was making the best of it: and Uncle William's thoughtful kindness had given her an uplift; but, the hunger was upon her for Castle O'Grady, for the shabby, faded dignity of the great rooms which had made Mrs. Paul Potter break out in a rapture of Americanese. She wanted the feel of the West Wind in the house, the great breath of the Atlantic. She wanted the line of mountains on the horizon; the wide sky over the bogs, the kindly faces, the soft familiar speech. She was lost, she was forlorn, if she dared to think of it. But she was going to push the longing away from her. She would not even wonder how the dogs were getting on without her; and Puck, the Shetland she had driven, whom Mrs. Paul Potter had pronounced too cunning for anything. Mrs. Paul had kept on the old servants. She had thought that something would be wrong with Castle O'Grady run by English servants. She wanted the place just as it was. She had only laughed when she sat down on a dog in the drawingroom and, changing her place rapidly in the firelight, had sat down upon another.

"I'm going to adopt your dogs," she had said. "I'm downright pleased I left my own in California at my Poppa's place. They wouldn't have fitted in maybe, being American dogs."

There was always something to look forward to, something like a rosy light far down the sadness. Kind Mrs. Paul Potter had begged a visit from Bitha and her father in the Summer. December, January, February, March, April, May, June. Perhaps it might be possible in June. And there was always the chance that the Board might get the money for the townlands.

"You'll find nothing spoilt," said Mrs. Paul, "except those immortal dogs of yours, and they're spoilt already. Just look at Mick. Isn't he cunning? You've only to tell him you're coming back and he'll understand. And Sheila's just lovely. Aren't her ears too silky?"

Bitha put away the thought of Mick sharply. He was only less dear than Patsy, and when she had kissed his hard little grey head in farewell, she had felt like a mother who is torn from her child. And dear Sheila, the red setter. Oh, the dogs did not bear thinking on!

She went into the tiny room which was to be hers, where her boxes stood unopened. Chris had found time to unpack an emergency trunk, and Bitha's brushes were laid out on the dressing-table. There were towels and soap, and a can of hot water left ready.

She sponged her face and brushed up her curls which were a little limp: when anything was amiss with Bitha her curls hung limply. She was in her tweed travelling dress: it was of a green colour which had something of Ireland in it and became her mightily. She felt rather grimy after the long journey—but there was no time to unpack, for suddenly, a little gong rang close at hand. Dinner, or supper, must be ready.

She discovered another thing in which Tempe scored. The electric light flooded the little room. She refused to remember how she had dressed at Castle O'Grady by the light of two candles and a flickering fire. She had not even a flower to wear, but the blouse she was wearing was emerald green: it was lucky she had not put on anything white to be grimed by the long journey. The string of amber about her neck was ornament enough.

The dressing-table glass had swing glasses to either side of it, an ingenuity Bitha admired simply. She had not yet discovered that the back of the "suite" was plain, unvarnished deal. The local furnishing company put its

pile on fronts and let its backs look after themselves. There was a long glass in the door of the tiny, gimerack wardrobe. Between the mirrors and the glaring electric light Bitha seemed to see herself for the first time.

"You ugly thing!" she said, apostrophizing herself.

Her red hair had been held as an unfortunate possession by the people she had grown up amongst. The Irish peasant counts all red hair an ugliness, and is prejudiced against it, perhaps because Judas was red-haired. And the name given to her, half-playfully, in her childhood, "Cock-nosed Biddy Casey," had made her very sensitive about that feature, which was really so delightful.

She came back from her inspection of herself to the knowledge that Patsy, already in one of the new chairs, was regarding her mistress with bright steadfast eyes gleaming through the tangle of her hair.

"You darling," she said, and caught the little dog into her arms. "You are happy, even in London, because I am here and Daddy is here. I am going to be happy too. And some day we shall all go back to Castle O'Grady, some day when the Board gets the money and takes our Farrakelly, Farrafore and Farragolden."

CHAPTER III

MAKING THE BEST OF IT

HERCULES O'GRADY was immensely pleased and cheered by his brother-in-law's thought for him. He was a person easy to make happy. The good food, the wine, the excellent cigars, soothed his spirit. The dinner-table had been charming, with pears and apples and green figs in a blue bowl, and the Castle O'Grady thin old silver and fine glass and napery.

"I've been feeling that it is not a house for a gentleman," he said. "The man who drove us here—you heard him, Bitha—'Meelizond Road, w'y it's workmen's dwellin's. Ain't you

mistook the name, Guvnor?""

Bitha had not heard the man.

"It is a pretty little place," she said, wist-

fully.

"We oughtn't to be too particular—eh, Bitha? especially this time of year. We must remember the Stable, Bitha, the Stable, where the King of all Gentlemen was born. I've been feeling bitter against Alice Orme, but I won't be bitter any more. William Orme has turned out a better fellow than I thought. These cigars are very good."

After all Bitha laid her head on the pillow of the little wooden bed, the springs of which creaked ominously under even her light weight, more happily than she had thought possible. Chris had helped her enormously to a more cheerful frame of mind. She had done wonders. So many dear familiar things met Bitha's eyes wherever she turned them. Chris had been unpacking while they were at dinner. When Bitha had said her prayers, undressed, and got into bed, Patsy scrambled out of her basket and stood up by the side of the bed to lick her mistress's hand, after which she had to be put back into bed and wrapped up again. Patsy was certainly very comfortable to a sore heart like Bitha's.

After all, things need not be too bad for Papa. Like many old soldiers he was simply religious. There was a church not too far away: and, for social matters, he must have a Club where he could meet some of his old comrades and other soldier-men, so as not to be too dull when Bitha had found her job. She did not quite know what the Club was going to cost, nor how

Papa was to be persuaded to it, for he had been cutting down his little luxuries with a thoroughness that had nearly broken Bitha's heart. But he must have a Club whether he liked it or not. How she *loved* Uncle William for providing the wine and the cigars! The spectacle of Papa drinking cold water with his dinner, and smoking a little briar pipe, had been absurdly pathetic to his adoring daughter.

She would ask Uncle William about the Club. She thought now that he would understand Papa's need of company. She wondered why they had gone in terror of Uncle William all those years, being quite unaware of how her pale face and red curls had crept into that successful man's heart and found a place there which his own daughters hardly filled. Afterwards, when she and Uncle William had set matters in train, Papa would have to be persuaded to the Club.

Bitha dropped asleep to dream of being back again in Castle O'Grady, a new Castle O'Grady, yet the old, with rents patched and leaks mended, all as though someone who loved it as she did had the money to repair the ravages of time and the weather, as though the Board had found the hundred thousand pounds for the three townlands.

She awoke to a foggy London morning and

Patsy scratching vigorously at her to wake her up. It was eight o'clock and they had been in bed by ten, so that she had had a good night's sleep.

She had barely turned over and looked at her watch, by the aid of the electric light which hung above her bed;—Bitha was young enough to enjoy switching on the electric light,—before Chris was in the room, with a piping hot cup of tea.

"The milkman kem all right," she said.
"He says th' order was given by a gentleman in a fur-lined coat. It would be the same sint the cases, may Heaven be his portion for that same!"

Uncle William again! Bitha's heart swelled up in affection and gratitude to the man whom the rest of the world had found so hard.

Chris had lit the gas-stove, remarking that they were "onnatural but handy conthrivances an' better thin the cowld room to get up to." She had closed the window, which was letting in the fog, and turned on the bath.

"The master's had his bath," she volunteered, through the swishing of the water. "Tis a quare likin' he have for the cowld water. But sure Quality do be quare! A newspaper's come. Somewan's thought o' that too."

After all, the little house was bright and warm. The workmen's dwellings were not yet awake, although the crying of children was to be heard through the calling of the newspaper-boys.

Going downstairs Bitha found her father, already in the dining-room, wearing the clean frosty look which had been his under all circumstances, as long as Bitha remembered him. He was reading a newspaper which she saw was called the *Observer*. There was a cheerful crackling of bacon on the grill close at hand, and a smell of breakfast pervaded the little house. Her father turned a bright face to her as she came in.

"I don't know what has come to William Orme," he said. "He used to be an overbearing, unsympathetic fellow. But he has apparently thought of our wants, even to this newspaper. The boy who brought it said the gentleman that ordered it had also ordered the Times to be delivered daily. William always had a head for details, and that is just what I never had. He began life as a Civil Service clerk. They are busy with details every day of their lives. Egad, I knew a fellow once who could tell you exactly how many lumps of coal you should burn in a day. He was a Civil Service clerk. It was his job, Bitha, my girl, his job."

After breakfast Bitha and her father went to church. Chris had already been there in the small hours of the morning.

When they came back to Tempe, where everything had been made clean and tidy,—Chris had been unpacking all the morning and most of the dear familiar things were in their places—Bitha took up the *Observer* and, having looked with interest at the illustrated advertisements of the newest fashions, she went on to more solid fact. Her eye fell on a long review of a book—"An Old Soldier's Memoirs" it was headed—and she began to read.

Apparently the *Observer* reviewer had found the book very charming: but Bitha was more critical. She thought the stories lacked point and that the old soldier prosed and was a trifle wearisome. Mentally she compared him with her father, whose gifts as a raconteur had set many a table in a roar.

Suddenly she had a brilliant idea. Papa should write his Reminiscences. Why, he had known everyone, and had been a great deal in the movement of life outside, during the years he had been content to spend at Castle O'Grady. All sorts of interesting people had come to Castle O'Grady at one time or another. Hercules O'Grady had served as a soldier in three continents.

He should write a book. It did not occur to Bitha that some of his joyous tales might lose their sparkle and effervescence in the cold medium of print. Hercules O'Grady was a scholar, a reading man. He had only to put down the things as Bitha had heard him tell them and he would beat such dull fellows as the Observer's old soldier out of the market.

Bitha was so full of her project that she must needs keep it to herself, so that she might enjoy it a little longer before she sprang it upon her father.

She looked across at the window the builder would have called a "bow." There were fancy windows dotted about the backs of the houses in Melisande Road as though an imaginative builder had had to make up to himself for the deadly monotony of the house-fronts, each exactly alike down the long road. "Bows" in front of Melisande Road might conceivably have got knocked off by the buses, but at the back there was a little open space, and the houses had all manner of pert sideway windows, doors opening into little balconies or upon the tiny gardens.

In the bow stood a writing-table, with an office-chair which revolved. Bitha had an immediate vision of her father sitting there writing, with piles of manuscript accumulating

on either side of him. To-morrow she would buy him quill-pens—he always wrote with a quill—and manuscript paper and a jar of ink. Not till she had made the purchases would she spring the wonderful scheme upon him.

That, and the Club, would secure her father's happiness when she must be away from him, arranging flowers for some tiresome persons who could not accomplish that delightful task

for themselves.

She had to tell it all to somebody, so she carried Patsy upstairs and told her all about it, and Patsy proved a sympathetic listener.

There was a legend of Patsy that she had once, in her puppyhood, carried and presented a bundle of goose-quills, which she had discovered in the kitchen, to her master.

"I can trust you, Patsy," said Bitha, "to be very quiet when Papa begins his great work. But, if he sits too long over it, you must go to him and stand up by his knees as you are doing by mine now, and remind him that you have not had your walk and that he has not had his. You must bark till he takes notice of you."

Patsy seemed to understand what was said to her and wagged her tail very hard, pushing her little ragged head into Bitha's hand to be fondled.

Bitha could remember some very distinguished visitors at Castle O'Grady, men who

had been of her father's own profession. She remembered one especially, Sir Philip Trenchard, a General for whom Colonel O'Grady had seemed to have a feeling almost of worship.

She could remember a wonderful evening when she had been brought down by her nurse to the dining-room, where she had sat on her father's knee and been fed daintily with strawberries dipped in sugar. There had been a great deal of talk going on, and the great soldier, whom indeed the other guests seemed to regard with a reverent homage, had suddenly broken away from a tale of the most daring act he had ever seen done by a soldier to say—

"That was what got you your V.C., O'Grady."

At which her father had blushed like a school-girl.

She wondered why her father had allowed all those fine people to go. She supposed it was since the poverty had come upon Castle O'Grady. Perhaps the beloved old place had been too lonely since they could not keep a motor like their neighbours, and the horses were old in the stables, with little chance of replacing them. Now that he was in London, even in Fulham, some of the old friends would find him out and make much of him, as he should be made much of.

The latter thought brought her to the remembrance of Aunt Alice, whose manner to Hercules O'Grady, when they had met of late years, had not been to the liking of his little daughter.

While she pinned a bunch of violets in her father's buttonhole, and smoothed his top hat and brushed his coat, before they set out for Queen's Gate, in the afternoon, her mind was full of Aunt Alice's attitude to her beloved father. She was at once hot with indignation, and soft with tender love for him who had suffered such indignity at the hands of a purseproud, hard woman.

As they went along the narrow streets, full of the Sunday crowd, people turned to look after the tall, well-set-up, elderly man, with his proud bearing, his clean rosy cheeks and blue eyes, and the girl by his side, who looked up at him, now and again, with such obvious pride and pleasure in him.

"Country folk," said a woman, as they passed. "They won't look like that once they come to be Londoners. See the voilets in 'is coat. They do bring the bean-fields and the lavender, some'ow."

She meant Bitha and her father, not the "voilets."

CHAPTER IV

LESS THAN KIND

The double drawing-rooms at Queen's Gate were crowded when they went in, or they seemed crowded to Bitha's inexperienced eyes. There was a great buzz of talk, a smell of flowers and delicate perfume and furs and hot cakes, all intermingled. People seemed rather to be talking against each other, for feminine voices were a little shrill against the deep masculine grumble.

Bitha felt vaguely alarmed as the manservant announced their names and they found themselves standing inside the door. Her eyes were misty for a second, after which she saw Aunt Alice bearing down upon them, very magnificent in a purple velvet gown, a sable cape hanging loosely about her shoulders.

"I am very glad you were able to come, Hercules," she said, but there was no gladness in her voice. "And this is Bitha! How you have grown, child!" There was a dowdy old lady sitting near. Lady Orme turned to her. "—Er"—the name was inaudible—"allow me to introduce Colonel O'Grady. Bitha, would you like to help your cousins with the tea? We try to dispense as far as possible with the services of our domestics on Sunday."

Lady Orme presented Bitha hurriedly to her two daughters, who were pouring out tea and handing cakes to half-a-dozen young men in attendance. The spirit-flame leaped under the silver kettle. The china and silver glittered in the light; the table-cloth had a deep frill of lace. There were piles of cakes in all manner of alluring colours, sandwiches, little glass pots of honey, Devonshire cream and jam; hot cakes; bread and butter; all the plenishing of a bountiful tea-table.

Bitha noted sub-consciously that the table was charming. She always saw charming things, and had a delicate talent for rendering what she saw in water-colours.

Her cousins, after the somewhat brusque nod which acknowledged the introduction, took little further notice of her. Rosamund was talking rather loudly with the young men near her. She had a shrill, high voice. She was high-nosed, with a red-and-white complexion, cold, well-opened blue eyes, and fair hair, elaborately dressed. Cynthia seemed bored and indifferent, but she had an honest look, and Bitha thought that her short face with the wide mouth and somewhat satirical smile was pleasing. Both were wearing what Bitha perceived, from her slight acquaintance with the fashions, to be coat-frocks, and Rosamund had on a coquettish little hat made of iridescent leaves, which, somehow, was a discordant note with her general largeness and coldness.

Suddenly Bitha was aware that her attire, a green tweed coat and skirt, made by Larry Slattery of Ballybunion, who was reported to have made golfing-suits for a King, was all wrong. Under their furs the ladies present were in silks and satins, where they were not wearing coat frocks. Rosamund, eyeing her for a second, had told her plainly all that was to be told. The green frock was Bitha's best. She had worn it at the Duchess's tea-parties at home, and the Duchess had said: "How well the green goes with that colouring! Come over here, Bitha, and kiss me, if you are not too haughty to kiss an old woman!"

But at Dulcimara everybody had worn tweeds under their motor coats or even riding habits. What was all right in the Duchess's drawing-room at Dulcimara was all wrong in Lady Orme's drawing-room at Queen's Gate. Apparently one of her cousins, at least, had no use for her. Rosamund was rudely ignoring her; and Cynthia had suddenly disappeared. She looked for her father, but he had gone with the lady to whom Aunt Alice had presented him, a dowdy old lady, who wore a strange feathered hat like a turban and an old-fashioned fur coat She had been sitting quite alone before the presentation was made, and had seemed as neglected as Bitha was feeling now.

No one took any notice of Bitha. After standing timidly by the table for a little while, she had retired into a corner and was pretending to examine some curios in a little glass-covered table. She thought everyone was looking at her. Her eyes were misty and her throat had begun to swell a little. If she only had the courage to cross the room to the open doors of another room into which her father must have passed with the lady! She had not the courage. She was horribly afraid she was going to cry.

Lady Orme passed her on her way downstairs with an elderly gentleman.

"Why not make yourself useful, Bitha?" she asked as she passed: and the question had a certain sharpness in it.

It was the last straw for Bitha. She choked. There was a horrible lump in her throat. She must get out of the room at all hazards before she broke down and disgraced herself by doing something ridiculous.

The room was thinning now. People were leaving it. Somewhere, in the distance, music began. Looking down at the medals and watches and seals and signet-rings in the curiotable, with eyes which did not see them, Bitha was aware that Rosamund had gone from the table and followed her mother downstairs. Somehow she had been aware of the coat-frock and the long, large feet, smartly shod, with silk stockings, passing her by. Nobody had remembered to give Bitha any tea.

Apparently there was a concert going on downstairs. How she wished she could follow the others! Why had Papa left her like this to the tender mercies of Aunt Alice and Rosamund? A memory came to her of how she had displayed her treasures, at eight years old, to the cold eyes of Rosamund, aged twelve. They had been such little treasures—a few birds' eggs, taken carefully, one from a nestful, lest the mother-bird should discover and desert her eggs-a bit of coloured quartz from Achill with an amethyst tinge, a bead-bag which the Duchess had given her. Rosamund had offered her five shillings for the bag. Cynthia had not been there at that time. When she had refused to sell her bag Rosamund

had called her precious things old rubbish,

pushing her away rudely.

Bitha had not shown her real treasures, which were living things. Patsy had been a puppy then, and was just recovering from mange and covered with bare spots. A seagull with a broken leg was another pet; and there was a house-fed lamb which was smelly and had sore eyes but was very dear to Bitha: to say nothing of a hospital full of pining chickens and lame ducks and rabbits and all manner of beasts, including a hedgehog. Bitha had had a most catholic love of animals and had found nothing common or unclean.

She had been remembering these things when someone spoke to her.

"I believe you've had no tea," said a pleasant male voice. "I have had none either. It has been a scrum. Tea here on Sundays is always a scrum."

Bitha looked up. The tears were in her eyes, but she kept them back by a supreme effort. The face she looked into was a plain, pleasant face,—the face of a young man of, she judged, about twenty-five or six. It was a brown face and the eyes were brown and kind. Their owner had a nervous trick of wrinkling up the eyes, which was responsible for a number of lines and wrinkles: and the mouth looked as though it was accustomed to laughter.

"I suggest that we should have our tee now in peace," said the young man. "My name is Geoffrey Pendray. I know the way of the house and I am going to ring for fresh tea."

Bitha's eyes were suddenly clear. The coming of this friend was wonderful. It had been so stupid of her to be frightened, to want to run away. Her face, which had been looking very lugubrious when Geoffrey Pendray's eyes first rested upon it, dimpled and became merry.

"I was feeling horribly lonely," she said.
"I am not accustomed to London drawing-

rooms."

"They are not all like this," said the young man, reassuringly. "Lady Orme is a bit . . . a bit alarming, don't you think? At least I have seen her so. She is very kind to me."

He went and rang the bell, came back and indicated the most comfortable chair by the fireside to Bitha. It had been occupied, Bitha noticed, by a small pale lady who wore a great string of pearls about her neck. As she threw back her fur wrap they had revealed themselves, dropping in milky lustre from her throat to her lap.

A servant came in answer to the bell.

"Fresh tea, please, and some hot cakes," said Mr. Pendray, as though he were very much at home in the house.

"7es, sir," said the man, and went off. From where Bitha was sitting she could see now tlat the back drawing-room was really a picture-gallery. It had been extended to quite a respeciable length from the back of the house—a pleasant room with a polished floor, glass chandelies, and a fireplace half-way down, which reminded her of Castle O'Grady. By the fire a group was standing, talking. Bitha heard her father's voice and her Uncle William's. So—they had been so near while she was miserable.

But she was miserable no longer. Her new friend—Bitha thought of him as a St. George not bright and beautiful like the St. George of Donatello, but a kindly brown-faced twinkling eyed St. George, out to fight the dragons of unkindness and cruelty, had changed everything.

The tea and hot cakes had come. Bitha had been led to the tables to select her cakes and sandwiches, which were in a bewildering variety. Geoffrey Pendray, despite her protests that she could not possibly eat so much, had piled her plate.

He made a very good tea himself, assuring her, when she would have hurried him, that the music sounded much better at a distance.

"There is your cousin Rosamund singing 'Cherry Ripe,'" he said. "Now don't you think distance softens it?"

Bitha was in agreement. Rosamund, singing in a highly trained voice, which seemed to combine the shrill and the husky, was declaring that—"Cherry Ripe, Cherry Ripe, all day I cry! I cry..." with an entire lack of sympathy for the fresh delicious old words and nusic.

"I would not be downstairs for anything," said Mr. Pendray, spearing another of cake, and sending a roguish glance towards Bitha.

"Don't you like music?" she aked inno-

cently.

"No; do you? It depends, doesn't it?"

Far down the picture-gallery Bitha could see her father, who seemed somehow to be the centre of the little group. The dowdy old lady, to whom Aunt Alice had introduced him without seeming to know her name, was sitting in a low chair, apparently listening intently to what he said. Bitha could see Uncle William's back. It was an unmistakeable back; the shoulders unusually broad and a little bowed. They had a look of gnarled strength as though they had pushed their way through forests of difficulty. The fourth of the party, a grey-haired, grey-bearded man, straddled the hearthrug, hands in pocket. His side-face was towards Bitha, but even from that she deduced good-nature.

"Papa seems to be having a good time,"

she said. "I am so pleased when he talks, for he talks so well. But lately he has talked so little that it has made me sad."

"He has good listeners," Mr. Pendray said. "My father and Sir William are both listening. Usually they talk against one another. And the Dowager looks pleased."

"Your father?" repeated Bitha.

"Yes, my father. You must come and talk to him presently. I have not nearly finished eating cakes. You are not backing me up. At your age one ought to eat cakes greedily. You are...?"

"Nearly seventeen," said Bitha.

"And I am twenty-five and just going to stand for Parliament. You make me feel immortally old."

Bitha laughed; and her father hearing her

paused in his speech and called to her.

"Come here, Bitha," he said. "Your uncle wishes to introduce you to the Duchess of Levan and Mr. Pendray."

Why, how different Papa looked! Since he had had no one to talk to but Bitha and had grown so silent he had been looking as though one day Bitha might wake up and find the incredible thing had come to pass, that Papa was growing old. And he was all she had, all she had in the world. Bitha was suddenly frightened of Papa growing old.

CHAPTER V

FRIENDS AND FOES

THE throng did not return to the drawingroom: there was a sound of motors being driven to the door and away again, and a frequent slamming of the hall-door; the house was emptying.

The happy party in the picture-gallery was quite unaware, till presently came Mrs. Pendray to collect her male belongings and the Duchess, who had come with her.

Geoffrey Pendray had found time, while the others talked, and he and Bitha made a pretence of looking at the pictures, to tell her, dropping the air of a hidden joke which appeared habitual to him, to look well at the Duchess, for she was worth looking at.

"She is a plain angel," he said. "She spends her time in doing good. She lost her only daughter five years ago. She was a splendid creature, Lady Esmé, over six feet

high and as handsome as her mother is plain, devoted to open-air life and animals and gardens and fields and rivers. Don't I sound like Herrick? She was making a wonderful new garden at Ferry, her Norfolk house,—she had been married only a year when her husband died,—and working in it herself as hard as any of the gardeners. She died of influenza after five days' illness. Her mother mothers the most wretched in her place. She is really an angel."

He broke off and laughed a little. "Don't I sound sentimental?" he asked.

"I like to hear about the poor Duchess," said Bitha. "She has such a kind face."

"She seems taken with your father. It is good to see her forgetting for a little while. She was terribly hard hit at first. She goes hardly anywhere, in society, I mean, as you may judge from her clothes. I don't know how my mother persuaded her to come here to-day."

He turned the conversation with a brisk air. They had moved on to another picture,—a Madonna and Child, which was the gem of Sir William's collection. It hung as in a little shrine, with golden doors that closed over it, when it was not on exhibition, and lights were placed so that it could be properly seen.

They looked for a minute or two. Then

Geoffrey Pendray turned aside to a Salvator Rosa and said, in an undertone: "Now you know all about me, Geoffrey Pendray, Eton, not Oxford, for I chose soldiering, but that is nearly at an end. I am reading for the Bar and shall be called in time and I am taking up politics, of course. The energy that has made my father what he is makes me dissatisfied to be a mere man about town. And you . . .?"

She answered him in his own vein. "Bitha, otherwise Elizabeth O'Grady, Sir William Orme's niece. In London because she cannot afford to live at home in the west of Ireland,

and must earn her bread."

"I cannot see you earning your bread," he said, incredulously. "Not but that everybody ought to earn his or her bread in one way or another. It gives life dignity. But how do you propose to do it?"

"I told Uncle William that I had a way with my hands. I can arrange flowers for one thing, and I think I could decorate tables beautifully.

I have schemes, beautiful schemes."

"You would like to do that?"

"Better than other things. There are so few things open to me. Aunt Alice thought I could sew for my cousins, renovate their evening frocks and so on. I am really clever in that way. I can do more with a length of ribbon and a yard of chiffon than most people. But I should not like that."

"No indeed; I should think not. You must talk to my mother about the other scheme. By the way, may I come to see you and your father?"

Bitha blushed.

"It is such a little place," she said. "A street of workmen's dwellings—Melisande Road, Fulham."

"How do you come to be there?" he asked, as though they were old friends. He had taken a note-book from his pocket while he spoke and was writing the address.

"Aunt Alice found it for us. It is really a pretty little place, but so tiny. The electric light is nice, of course. It is lovely to switch it on and off. But Castle O'Grady was so big—much too big, of course—with acres of rooms. You could get quite a good walk through the house if the weather was impossible. Not that it was often impossible for us. The weather doesn't hurt you if you trust it. We were out in all weathers. It is like living in a very small box at Tempe after Castle O'Grady."

"Tempe—is that its name?" he asked; and if he felt amused he kept it out of his voice.

"Yes; isn't it an absurd name? It has little woolly lions on the gate-posts. There are

the same woolly lions on the same gate-posts, in front of the same little red-brick houses, for miles to either side of us. We are 336, and we are only the middle of the road. Of course the uneven numbers are on the other side, so it is not as long as it sounds."

"Of course," he answered gravely. "I hope

you have Tempe painted on your gate."

"Oh, yes," she assured him. "It is in quite large white letters; and 336 is on the glass over the hall-door. You'd never find it else. But will you really come to see us? Papa will be so pleased."

"It will be a great pleasure for me. May I come soon, before you begin your profes-

sional career. Tuesday-may I?"

"Yes; for tea?"

"Oh, thank you," he said fervently. "By the way is your father by any chance the Hercules O'Grady who commanded a battalion of the Munsters at Krugersdorp?"

"He got his V.C. there," Bitha said, flushing

again.

"I have a friend who served under him." He had an air of lifting his hat. "Pierce Lanagan. He used to tell us about your father and the things he did. Odd that I should meet you. Pierce coached me for Sandhurst. All Pierce's pupils were brought up, so to speak,

on Hercules O'Grady. I have always longed to know him."

Then Mrs. Pendray had come to collect her party and Bitha was called to be introduced.

"My little niece has a novel plan for earning her bread, Mrs. Pendray," Uncle William said.

"I have promised her your interest."

"Of course, of course," said Mrs. Pendray good-naturedly. "Come and see me any morning at ten o'clock. I am a very busy person, my child."

"Ask her to lunch, Marian," said Mr. Pendray. "Ten o'clock is such an uncomfort-

able hour."

So Bitha and her father were both asked to lunch, and Mr. and Mrs. Pendray went off with the Duchess in their train, she waiting at the last moment to ask Bitha's address so that she might have the pleasure of calling, and showing no surprise at learning it. She knew Melisande Road quite well, she added.

Geoffrey Pendray stayed behind, having announced his intention of going back to his Club.

"You won't mind my walking a bit of the way with you," he said, in an aside to Bitha.

"Not if it does not take you out of your road," she answered.

"Not at all," he assured her, the air of

laughter returning to him. "It is quite possible to reach Piccadilly by way of Fulham and the other way about. Besides, I can show you the way if you are a stranger in London, and learn it myself."

Bitha did not feel surprise at his remarks. She plucked her father's arm to go, but Uncle William would not hear of it.

"What!" he said, "Go home to that poky little place my wife has found for you? It wasn't my choice. Wonderful woman, my wife,—but careful. It is the way of women sometimes to be careful, long after the need for carefulness has disappeared. It will do for the moment, till we find something else. Of course you will stay for supper. No dinners on Sunday. My wife doesn't allow it. I can't see any difference myself except that some of the dishes are cold. You too, Geoffrey?"

But Geoffrey could not stay. He was saying something about bringing his mother to see Bitha when Lady Orme appeared. Bitha was looking very happy. It was so delightful to see this wonderful new understanding between Papa and Uncle William. Papa had been showing himself at his best, and had been listened to and been looked up to by these people of importance. Uncle William was actually clapping Papa on the back and telling

him he was a wonderful fellow. And then—in came Aunt Alice.

She was wearing what Hercules O'Grady had once called her fraudulent smile, but as she sailed in Bitha had a sudden sense of alarm: her keen sensitiveness had detected storm in the air and she felt cowed by it. Everything had been so happy. She remembered now that Papa had often said that Alice had a deuce of a temper.

"What a clearance!" she said, sitting down without acknowledgment in the chair from which Hercules O'Grady had risen. "Are you going, Captain Pendray? We had some very good music. You did not hear it. Nor you,

Bitha?"

"Oh, but indeed we did," said Geoffrey. "We thought we should not have heard it so well downstairs. The 'Cherry Ripe' was charming. The voice sounded almost at our ears."

"'We' and 'our,'" repeated Lady Orme
"My naughty husband and you and your
father and Bitha and Colonel O'Grady. It
was discouraging to the musicians not to have
had your countenance."

"Hercules was entertaining us so excellently," said her husband, apparently oblivious of the omen of his wife's face. "I had no idea

that Hercules was such a raconteur or I had forgotten it. Those election stories now, Hercules . . ."

"I must hear them another time," Lady Orme said, with an elaborate yawn. "I am rather tired now and shall go to my boudoir for a rest. I will say good-bye, Hercules, and Bitha. You must come in and see us another time when we are not too crowded."

She held out a large hand, covered with rings.

"Hercules and Bitha are staying for supper," said Sir William.

"Oh! I did not know. I should have thought they would be glad to get home, after travelling yesterday."

"Not a bit of it. Hercules is as fresh as paint; and children like Bitha are never tired."

Bitha had a curious idea that husband and wife measured glances.

Perhaps, after all, Uncle William was not so much under his wife's thumb as the world supposed.

"I should have thought.... Bitha might have liked to change. I will send one of the girls to look after her. It is so uncomfortable to sit down to dinner in tweeds."

"Supper is an informal meal," Sir William said dogmatically.

Lady Orme went off, having succeeded in making Hercules O'Grady and his daughter thoroughly uncomfortable. It was an art no man could have emulated or frustrated. But William Orme in his masterful way would not hear of their going. He made Bitha take off her hat and coat, and sit in the comfortable easy chair by the fire. Curled up in it, her small face and red curls, through which a green ribbon ran, in relief against the dark background of the chair-covering, Bitha was charming. After a while, listening to her father and Sir William, she forgot that Aunt Alice was unpleasant.

It was doing her father so much good. He had been hating to accept any benefit at the hands of that hard successful man, William Orme. And here was William Orme, by some great magic and kindness, become a friendly cheerful person, well pleased with the feckless Hercules. It was marvellous.

CHAPTER VI

EAVESDROPPERS

A gong rang through the house and Sir William turned to his brother-in-law.

"Come and have a wash, Hercules," he said.

That is the dressing-bell. Oh, by the way, we must have someone to look after Bitha."

He rang the bell and a footman appeared.

"I want one of the young ladies," he said, "and, if they are dressing, please send a maid."

He and Colonel O'Grady went off, and Bitha waited in the room, in which the lights had been turned out. There was a little firelight. The heavy draped curtains which divided the picture-gallery from the drawing-room had been drawn across. A slit of light came through and fell on the floor almost at Bitha's feet.

While she waited for the maid someone came into the drawing-room—more than one person. She heard Lady Orme's voice.

"Your father would keep them," she said.
"I don't know what is coming over him. He used to despise Hercules O'Grady for the unpractical foolish creature he is. He might have seen that I was tired and wanted to be quiet. I'm sure I made it plain enough, but they would not go."

"They would be rather dense coming from their Irish bogs." The voice was Rosamund's. "I suppose the girl has nothing to put on tonight except that rough tweed. Fancy her coming in that! People stared at her so. I was really very much mortified when I had to

say she was my cousin."

Cynthia laughed, and the laugh had a malicious sound.

"She is really pretty, Rosamund," she said.

"It was obvious that Captain Pendray thought
so. He never appeared in the music room—

not even to listen to your singing."

"Oh, that wasn't inclination," Rosamund said, and there was a sulky sound in her voice. "You know that Geoffrey Pendray is odd. You remember that plain governess of Mrs. Sanson's who used to play the piano for dancing on all Mrs. Sanson's afternoons till her fingers must have ached; and no one ever thought of bringing the poor wretch her tea till Geoffrey Pendray did it one afternoon, and actually took

the girl's place at the piano. It was rather a facer for Ada Sanson."

"She wouldn't have taken it lying down if he hadn't been old Pendray's son," Cynthia responded. "I think myself it was brutal of the woman."

"I only hope," said Lady Orme fretfully, "that we are not going to be overrun by these Irish relatives of your father."

Bitha waited to hear no more. She picked up her hat and went noiselessly to the door. She did not quite know what she was going to do. She stood in the doorway for a second or two uncertain. Her impulse was to get out of the house anyhow, but how was she going to run away and leave her father behind? She stood, poised for flight. Then a sudden terror came to her lest one of the party in the drawing-room should come out and find her standing there.

She felt as though someone had struck her a violent blow from which she still reeled. Her head buzzed and her throat ached. She wanted to cry badly, but she must not have that relief. Only, if one of them should come out, they must not find her standing in the hall; and a servant might come at any time. They must all be downstairs enjoying themselves, or perhaps Sunday was an evening off, for the butler's

winged chair, dedicated to his portly presence, stood empty.

She went upstairs rather precipitately. If anyone found her there she could say she was looking for the maid Sir William had promised to send. She said to herself that she must go through with it, she must go through with it. She must eat the bread she abhorred to eat, since it was grudged bread. Above all, her father must not know. It must be kept from him at all costs. Once she got to work she need be little in evidence at Queen's Gate.

At the top of the stairs she met a middle-aged maid.

"It is Miss O'Grady I am speakin' to," she said, in a pleasant Scottish accent. "I am Margaret, please, Miss. I hope you haven't been waiting for me. Miss Cynthia sent me word to attend you, but I was out of the way."

Bitha's heart went out to the friendly pleasant creature who had that way of friendliness, mingled with respect, of which the Celt has the secret.

"I'm afraid I'm rather late," she said, "but it won't matter, as I've nothing to change into. I have only just to wash my hands."

"As you like, Miss. But you'll let me do your hair for you. It'll be lovely hair to do."

Margaret led the way into a beautiful bed-

room, all soft and glowing colours, with shaded electric lights and a cheerful fire. Odd that it should have set Bitha's heart aching for the great shabby rooms at Castle O'Grady, where the thin carpets rose in a high wind like the waves of the sea, and the curtains were fretted in holes; where, when Bitha had made an illumination of four candles, two on the dressing table, two on the chimney piece, all the distant spaces of the room were in Darkest Africa.

"Dear me!" said Margaret, "the young leddies, your cousins, might ha' thought o' lendin' ye one o' their wee bit jackets or tunics, as they name them. They've more in their wardrobe than ever they'll put on."

"Oh, thank you," said Bitha, "I shouldn't like that at all."

Margaret was brushing out her curls by this time, having assured her that supper would not be before eight. Bitha glanced at herself in the glass and looked away. She hardly ever looked in the glass. She had taken it for granted that she was ugly, with that horrid red hair; the pale skin, as fine and firm in texture as a lily-leaf, which she wronged, calling it "tallow," the nose which still was daintily tip-tilted. The servants who in sheer gaiety of heart had called her "Cock-nosed Biddy Casey" had laid the seeds of more humble self-distrust than they knew.

"Ye'll have been troublin'," said Margaret suddenly, in a voice as though she soothed a sick child.

Bitha choked a little.

"Is it so plain as all that?" she asked, and the tears came.

Margaret went on brushing her hair softly.

"I wouldn't take it to heart too much, Miss," she said, as though she knew the whole story. "Miss Rosamund has a sharp way with her like her Leddyship, but Miss Cynthia's no' bad, though she sounds sharp too. It's very wairldly in this house where the Sabbaths pass an' none remembers Him that made them. 'Tis all glitter an' riches; but Miss Cynthia's no' bad; an' Sir William's just if he's a wee bit hard."

Bitha was too accustomed to Irish servants to be surprised at Margaret. She perceived that Margaret was much older than she had taken her to be at first. Why there were streaks of silver in her pale hair and many little wrinkles in her rosy face. Bitha dried her eyes. The sympathy had brought the tears, but it had also comforted her.

"That's reet," said Margaret, "that's reet! Now you shall hae the hand-glass to study your head. It's bonny. Now a wee drop rose-water for your eyes and you'll be all reet to face

the wairld. Always keep in mind, my bairnie, that there's One cares even if the wairld's unkind."

Bitha caught sight of a thin gold weddingring on Margaret's finger as she laid back the brushes in their place.

"You are married?" she said timidly.

"I'm a widow," Margaret answered, "wi' none but mysel' to think on. I had a wee lassie once. She and my man sleep together in Glan Airloch."

Ah, that was it! It was the motherhood in Margaret that had broken the bonds of convention and forced her to give comfort.

"You look bonny," she said. "It's lovely red locks you're havin'. Many a one would be proud o' the like. I wish I'd more to do for

you, but you look bonny all the same."

"Do they dress?" Bitha asked. Not that she minded very much. The affront she had suffered—she did not dare to think on what Aunt Alice had said of her father—had put all such small matters as conventional dressing out of her head.

"They are always dressin' up," said Margaret with a weary air, which amused Bitha even at this moment. "Tis a procession of clothes they are puttin' on. But Miss Cynthia's no' unkind, hinny, she's no' unkind. She'll do a kind thing

now and again. Miss Rosamund takes more after her Leddyship. Miss Cynthia's message was that I was to attend ye, Miss, in her room."

"Oh, this is her room?" Bitha asked, with some interest. Cynthia was the one with the husky voice who had called the unknown Ada Sanson brutal for her unkindness to her plain governess. Rosamund had the shrill, high, thin voice.

As though Margaret's speech had summoned her, the door opened and Cynthia came in. She was looking her best in a soft garment of very pale green, which suited her fairness—a tea-frock—although Bitha did not yet know it by that name.

"I came up to see if you wanted anything," Cynthia said in her deep throaty voice. "There are some people coming in to-night. You won't mind wearing something of mine, eh, Bitha? Of course my clothes will be too big for you, but we are all so bunchy now-a-days that fit hardly matters,—not in those things, anyhow."

Bitha wanted to say that she would stick to her tweeds, but somehow she could not say it. She was softened and gratified by this advance from one of her cousins. It made it easier to stay. And—it was not Cynthia who had spoken despitefully of Bitha's beloved Papa.

Cynthia fetched from the wardrobe an airy

garment of soft white stuff on which a bead embroidery showed like dewdrops. It had a green girdle and there was some green at the neck and the short sleeves.

"This will do, I think," she said, laying the pretty thing down on the bed and eyeing it with satisfaction. "Margaret can take it in a bit for you, Bitha; and after you've worn it you'd better take it home. It is too jeune fille for me. Rosamund and I never were jeunes filles, properly speaking: we are too bigboned for such fluffy things. There, don't thank me, child! It is a white elephant to me though it doesn't look like it. I knew I was a fool when I bought it, for I never could wear it."

"Oh!" said Bitha with a little shiver and gasp—half-delight, half-alarm. "What will Aunt Alice think?"

"Now don't be silly, Bitha. We have brought our mother up very well, I assure you. She never interferes about our clothes, nor asks what we do with them when we grow tired of them. Rosamund sells hers through the Woman of Fashion. She doesn't get enough to make it worth while, but she has a frugal mind, so it satisfies her, I suppose."

The frock was put on, and Cynthia grunted with satisfaction: it was a form the husky and throaty voice took in moments of emotion.

Bitha looked lovely in the frock, which was soft as rose-leaves, white as down, with the sparkle of frost over it; and she was none the less charming for the air of timidity with which she glanced at herself in the long cheval glass.

"It is much too pretty for me," she said. "I ought not to rob you of it, Cousin Cynthia."

"Shoes, stockings, the seed-pearl necklace," Cynthia said, as though she were telling over a catalogue in her own mind.

She went to another wardrobe, with her masterful air when she walked; her evening-dress looked out of place on her. A riding habit, or a sports-suit would have been more in Cynthia's way. She produced the shoes and stockings and waited while Margaret put them on. Then she herself clasped the twist of seed-pearls about Bitha's slender neck.

"You can pack the whole lot for Miss O'Grady," she said to Margaret.

Bitha, flushed and shy, was trying to thank her but she cut the thanks short.

"The things are no good to me. I wouldn't give them to you if they were. We are all thoroughly selfish and self-seeking here, except perhaps Papa—and he can be as hard as nails. There's only Jim for salvation in this family. That is why we all plank whatever hearts we possess on Jim."

CHAPTER VII

A SUPPER PARTY

When Bitha came into the drawing-room, trying to make herself look as small as possible, in the wake of Cynthia, Lady Orme looked at her in amazement.

"You have changed, child!" she said. "How did you manage that?"

The pale-blue, rather protruding, eyes scanned Bitha through a lorgnette, the tortoiseshell handle of which was studded with diamonds.

"She didn't bring it, Mamma," said Cynthia. "I've rigged her out. Isn't she pretty in that frock, which I never could wear?"

"Very pretty," said Lady Orme coldly, and turned away. Looking up quickly Bitha saw in the glass facing her a bit of bye-play. Rosamund was looking furious enquiry at Cynthia, who met it with a cynical smile. It was as though the sisters declared war over Bitha.

Well, Bitha could bear with Aunt Alice and

Rosamund if she had Uncle William and Cynthia on her side. And Jim, the fifteen-year old boy, was coming home from Eton for the Christmas holidays in about ten days' time. If Jim had all the virtues of the Orme family, well, there would be a balance of three to two.

Bitha had suddenly taken Cynthia, the roughtongued, but sound-hearted, to her bosom. A little while ago she had been saying to herself that nothing, nothing, would induce her to enter this house again, nor to let her dear beloved old father go where he was so little appreciated.

Now—everything was changed. She had Cynthia on her side. The two sisters snapped at each other, and Lady Orme said, with a strange air of helplessness, that even as children they had fought like cat and dog. "I being the dog," said Cynthia.

Then Colonel O'Grady came into the room, apologising for his not being dressed, with the charming manner which had won him so much feminine affection. He glanced with a little puzzlement at Bitha, who was quite sure that he did not perceive the dress, although he was aware vaguely of its effect.

Lady Orme, by her manner, showed pretty plainly that Hercules O'Grady did not appeal to her. She turned away remarking that the Bosanquets were late. Then Sir William came

in and pulled down Bitha to sit on the sofa beside him.

The Bosanquets were apparently a young brother and sister, and there was something in Lady Orme's reference to them which suggested that she held them in high consideration.

"By the way," she said, languidly, "who was the dowdy old woman Mrs. Pen. brought with her this afternoon? I did not catch her name. One of her benevolences, I suppose. It seems a little too much that she should impose them on her friends. Don't you think so, Rosamund?"

"An old bundle of rags," said Rosamund, contemptuously. "She actually called me' my dear' when she asked me for some tea. I gave her the cold shoulder, I can tell you."

"Quite right too," said Lady Orme. "I thought of telling Simmons to ask her if she was not looking for the servants' hall. I only just refrained. Mrs. Pendray takes liberties, don't you think? That old woman's feathered turban in the style of the Sixties and her whole get-up spoilt the look of my rooms."

"I am glad you refrained from that enquiry about the servants' hall," said Sir William. "But I am very sorry if Rosamund was rude to the Duchess."

"The Duchess!" cried Lady Orme and Rosamund in chorus. "What Duchess?"

"The Dowager Duchess of St. Levan. Did

you not know?"

"That the Duchess! That old frump! And I have been trying to meet her ever since she took up the Pendrays, because of the money she gets from them for her good works, I suppose. Oh, I am mortified!"

She turned sharply on Rosamund. "I hope you were not positively rude to her," she said. "I was rude only in desire. But you—you know you can be detestably rude at times, Rosamund. You may have done irreparable harm."

"Need we discuss these matters before our

guests?" asked Sir William wearily.

Rosamund flounced from the room, while Cynthia smiled her cynical smile. Bitha felt profoundly uncomfortable, yet could not refrain from some inward amusement, mixed with a little malice. Her father had moved away to a table at a distance where was a great number of newspapers and magazines, in which he pretended to be interested.

"I can't forgive Marian Pendray," Lady Orme went on, "I hate a woman who mumbles names. She had been promising for a long time to bring the Duchess to see me. And to think it should have happened like this!" "I shouldn't bother about it," Sir William said. "People of the Duchess's rank are very apt not to know when people are rude. We had a very good talk in the picture-gallery and she was quite unwilling to tear herself away. She is a charming woman. Perhaps Rosamund will learn now the danger of being rude to people who may turn out to be personages."

"Oh, Rosamund! Rosamund takes her own way. She will not be spoken to. She sulked, even when she was a child, and would never

concede that she could be in the wrong."

Lady Orme was happily unaware that her daughter had inherited certain traits of her own character.

"Ah, well," Sir William said, with a sigh, "Christmas will soon be here, and Jim. It will be good to see Jim."

The family jar was put an end to by Mr. and Miss Bosanquet's being announced. Miss Bosanquet was a large fair girl, very floppy as to figure, and wearing her grey and silver frock as though it had been tossed on to her with a hay-fork. Her hair, of a colourless fairness, was piled anyhow on top of her head, strands of it escaping untidily as though she had been out in a high wind and it had made havoc of her hair-dressing. But as she came forward, murmuring apologies for being late, in a voice

as soft as rose-leaves, Bitha decided that she was very attractive.

Edward Bosanquet, her brother, was small, pale and neat, with a smooth golden head and a little golden moustache, a very dandyish person and oddly unlike his sister.

Lady Orme made herself very agreeable to Miss Bosanquet during supper, an elaborate meal of many dishes. Rosamund, who had come back, apparently forgetting her mistake of the afternoon and the discussion upon it, was quite sparkling in conversation with Edward Bosanquet, who sat on her right hand.

Cynthia had chosen to sit by Colonel O'Grady and was being very agreeable to him, for which Bitha sent her from time to time radiant glances of a burning gratitude.

Sir William meanwhile was warning Bitha off the unwholesome dishes, of which there seemed a good many.

"I don't know how it is," he said, "but whenever I try any of my wife's new dishes they are invariably crab, and crab is poison to me, Bitha, although to your golden youth it may be harmless."

Then he turned to talk of Jim and his face changed. The hardness which was still there, although modified for Bitha, was suddenly softened.

"Well, well," he said, "there's plenty of trouble in the world; and a man like me, who is always trying to get the better of his fellows,—but in a straight deal, mind you, Bitha; it's not my fault if other people are fools,—has many anxieties. There's a deal of money to be found for all manner of purposes. You see this house. I could do with something much less expensive, but your Aunt Alice don't see it. She don't see it, Bitha. Still—we're near the holidays. In less than a week Jim will be home."

After a while Lady Orme seemed to recover from her fit of ill temper. They adjourned to the music-room, where Rosamund played the piano and Captain Bosanquet hung over her, in a recess well away from the others. Sir William and Colonel O'Grady had gone off to smoke. Cynthia had gone out. It was to be a wonder to Bitha for many days, this strange independence of her cousins, each of whom carried a latch-key. Cynthia had announced that she would probably not be in before eleven; she was going to a concert at the Queen's Hall.

"Don't forget your parcel, kid," she had said to Bitha in her most manly fashion. "I'll come round to your slum one of these days and see how you are getting on." Bitha laughed. She was not the least bit in the world offended at Cynthia's calling Melisande Road a slum.

But Lady Orme turned a deep brick-dust red.

"You must not take Cynthia au pied de la lettre," she said to Mary Bosanquet. "The slum is a street of very pretty houses in Fulham. I selected it because you have only to walk over the bridge to reach some quite countrified spots. Of course Melisande Road is a good bit from the river; but Bitha is very fond of walking and her father has led a very active life up to this."

"Oh, I know Melisande Road," said Mary Bosanquet. "Oddly enough, it belongs to Papa. I know there are some pretty little houses,—Papa was not pleased with the estate architect who passed them. I often visit the people there, I mean the poor people."

She was suddenly confused, as though she had said something wrong. Lady Orme went on, still a little flushed, in the smooth voice which Bitha had heard her use to one or two of her guests that afternoon.

"You see, Bitha and her Papa have very little money. I believe Irish people seldom or never have any money. They are a charming but irresponsible race. It was better to begin by cutting the coat according to the cloth.

Tempe is a very pretty little house, and I have furnished it sweetly. It is quite a little nest, although of course a great come-down from Castle O'Grady with its fifty bedrooms."

It was Mary Bosanquet's turn to blush.

"I am so glad that I know the way to Melisande Road," she said, and then, turning to Bitha, as though she asked a favour: "Please may I come to see you? I could show you the way to Wimbledon Common. It is not really very far from Melisande Road."

Lady Orme interposed hastily, before Bitha

could speak.

"That would be very kind, but Bitha is going to be so busy. We think we have found a career for her. She would not be at all happy sitting still and allowing her relatives to be good to her."

"Oh," said Mary Bosanquet, hastily. When she talked her breath came in soft pants. "A career! How very interesting! I always envy people with careers. Papa is so very old-fashioned. He would never hear of a career for his daughters. I do what I can, but it is often very dull having nothing definite to do."

"My dear child," said Lady Orme, her voice becoming almost a purr. "Your case is quite different from poor Bitha's. You have no need to work. Indeed, *your* working would disturb the balance of things, and you have never been accustomed to work."

Quite suddenly Bitha made the discovery that Aunt Alice was vulgar. The discovery had the unexpected result of making it easier to bear with her. She could not help it, poor thing! Bitha supposed she must always be giving herself away.

She felt sorry for Mary Bosanquet, who was

plainly embarrassed.

"I hope, if anybody will trust me," she said, "to go out as a sort of decorator. I have been told that I arrange flowers beautifully and that I have a great sense of the grouping of colours. I know I can make a room look nice with very little to go upon. It seems a slender equipment for a career, but I shall do my best."

"Bitha has always been so clever with her fingers," Lady Orme broke in. "Even as a little girl she had chic. She could manipulate a ribbon or a yard of chiffon or a posy of flowers wonderfully. She used to be so quaint at Castle O'Grady in gowns that belonged to her great-grandmother which she contrived to fit to her little figure. I did hope she would have settled down with us and helped the girls and me with our frocks. She need never have

gone out to earn her bread, but girls are so adventurous now-a-days."

"I think it a perfectly delightful career," said Mary Bosanquet. "I wonder if you would care to come to us on the 20th. We shall be having a Christmas dance. The invitations are not yet out. I am supposed to help with the decorations, but I'm afraid I'm not much good, and Mamma is always so busy. Could you come for a couple of days, coming in on the 18th or 19th, so as to select your flowers and the other things?"

"But how kind!" said Lady Orme. "It is such a chance for Bitha. All I fear is that it may be a too-important occasion for Bitha

to try her ''prentice hand' ?"

"I am sure she will do beautifully, beautifully," panted Mary Bosanquet. "And I hope it will be pleasant for her. You like dancing I am sure, Miss O'Grady. We hope to have a good many dancing men."

"But how kind!" said Lady Orme again, as though the kindness were to her. "I am sure Bitha would not care to appear as a guest where she was really employed. But she appreciates your great kindness none the less."

"Oh, I should hate her not to dance," Miss Bosanquet said, turning quite pink. "I think it would be a horrid arrangement otherwise. She will be a guest, of course."

Afterwards Aunt Alice found time to impress upon Bitha while she was putting on her hat, having changed from her airy garment back to her tweeds, that, of course, Mary Bosanquet's civility was only because Bitha was a relation of the Ormes.

"Fancy an ordinary woman who comes to do the flowers being given all the privileges of a guest!" she said. "I think perhaps it would be wiser not to accept all Mary Bosanquet says. She is such a good-natured creature. And, of course, you have noticed that her brother is épris with Rosamund. They are immensely rich. Mrs. Bosanquet, by the way, is a countrywoman of yours, a daughter of a very old and impoverished family. Edward Bosanquet is a nobody, but she has birth enough for both."

Margaret came into the hall at this point with the box containing the white frock and its accompaniments.

"It'll be too lairge for the young leddy to carry," she said. "It will be forwardin' it by Carter Paterson we'll be."

"But what is this?" Lady Orme asked; and Cynthia's generosity had to be explained to her.

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"Cynthia is very impulsive," she said, disapprovingly. "If the frock does not suit her she could have exchanged it."

"She'll be none the waur, me leddy, for thinkin' on her ain flesh and bluid," said Margaret boldly. "Miss Bitha lookit bonny in it."

But somehow the savour of Cynthia's gift had been taken away for Bitha.

CHAPTER VIII

BITHA'S MARKETING

BITHA had certainly done wonders with Tempe. In her own mind she thanked Mrs. Paul Potter, who had bidden her fill a trunk with all manner of odds and ends, telling her she'd need these familiar things to live with wherever she went.

With the old chintzes and brocades, the bits of silver and china, the covers for sofas and chairs, the hundred and one bits of things, which the vivacious American had advised Bitha to take,—against her own interests, as she said,—the gimcrack room had attained dignity and beauty. The cheap upholstering of the local furniture company was covered up with the beautiful old faded chintzes from Castle O'Grady. The same hung at the windows. A couple of brass pitchers held an armful of brown oak-leaves, with a bunch of berries, which Bitha had bought from a street-hawker for a few pence. A thin old Persian

rug lay in front of the fireplace; another by the writing table where Hercules O'Grady's magnum opus was to be written. Madam O'Grady's Sèvres tea-service, bought in Paris before the French Revolution, shone and sparkled behind the glass doors of the imitation Chippendale bookcase, which Bitha had lined with a Liberty silk. It was remarkable, and said much for Bitha's skill in arrangement, that the aristocrats from Castle O'Grady did not swear at their shoddy companions; but somehow they did not. With a bright fire, the little room at Tempe looked uncommonly pleasant as Bitha came in from doing her morning's marketing.

She was learning to market with the aid of Chris, who carried a basket in which their purchases were stored. It was quite a new experience for Bitha, and perhaps the companionship of Chris gave her moral support. Chris had accepted rebelliously the doctrine of the fixed price in London marketing. The first transactions had been complicated by Chris's ejaculations.

"You wouldn't be givin' that man what he asks, Miss Bitha!"

"Glory be to Goodness, tuppence for that bit of parsley that ye'd throw out in the ditch in Ireland!"

"This is a country of robbers, Miss Bitha!"

But by degrees Chris accepted, without open demur, the unfortunate conditions of marketing in London, and began to take a lively interest in the discovery that a penny a pound was to be saved by going to one shop rather than another: that one shop was good for bacon and another for tea: that by judicious buying of something there was a glut of, money was to be saved.

Bitha was not keen on the shopping adventures, but she had the design of teaching Chris, so that the housekeeping might devolve on Chris when she herself was in full work, as she hoped soon to be. Her pupil made such progress that she had to impress upon her that economies in food for herself were not desirable: for Chris had the common Irish servant's way of thinking a cup of tea was all that was necessary for herself, while her employers must live on the fat of the land.

She was greatly helped in the training of Chris by a chance acquaintance with Madame Mathilde, a French teacher of music, who had the upper flat next door. Across the little rail which divided their common balcony, she imparted to Bitha her misery because of the screaming children, the barrel organs, the chattering, scolding women, the smelly motor-buses, the hawkers and street criers of many

kinds, who broke what otherwise might have been the peace of Melisande Road.

For whatever might be made of Tempe within doors, little was possible outside. Melisande Road was very noisy. The most that could be said of it was that it was respectable, and that was something to be grateful for to one who, like Bitha, had a grateful heart.

She sympathized with Madame Mathilde, who complained that the beautiful music was driven from her ears and her fingers by the raucous noises of the street; and the sympathy made a friend of the Frenchwoman, who seemed a lonely creature.

They had met several times on their marketing expeditions before Madame Mathilde offered to show Bitha how to market.

"You have but to follow me," she said. "You buy in little. You have bought too mooch, mooch too mooch. See now—I make me my ragout, and you shall share it if you are so gracious, so I buy in double."

Leaving her own marketing Bitha followed Madame Mathilde on what seemed a wild career, while Chris, grinning, followed.

Madame explained as she bought. She dealt little with local shops. She preferred Harrods', where things could be got that were unobtainable in the smaller shops. It was quite a long

way afield for Bitha's marketing, but a bus brought them to Harrods' in a very short time.

Harrods' assistants seemed to know Madame. Bitha observed that they smiled at each other on her approach.

"I go to make me my ragout," she said,

dramatically. "Observe you of me!"

She swooped upon a dismembered chicken and selected two portions of it, then two slices of bacon in which the fat and lean were nicely mingled. Next there was the fish department, where she acquired three oysters. Then to the vegetables for a bunch of herbs, a lemon and some mushrooms. Everywhere she paid infinitesimal prices, and the bewildered assistants always sold under protest, but she got the things and she paid the money.

"Observe you of me!" she said impressively to Bitha, including Chris with a wave of the hand. "You shall see me buy the *champignons*."

Her way of buying the *champignons* was to select half-a-dozen fine little "button" mush-rooms from the basket and put down twopence for them, while the assistant protested that mushrooms were sold by the pound and not by the pennyworth.

"These I shall have," Madame repeated, sticking to her guns. "Two pennies!" and

she indicated the coins.

An infinitesimal quantity of the best butter, a tiny pot of cream, a couple of eggs, a quarter of a pound of whole coffee, were included in Madame's marketing, which when totalled, had cost a surprisingly small sum. She was impressing on Bitha that she must always roast and grind her own coffee, that she must have a pepper mill for her pepper and so on: and there was a French shop where she bought her half-bottle of white wine for the equivalent of a franc.

"You shall share my déjeuner," she said, "I will have you taste of my ragout."

Bitha accepted the invitation—her father had re-discovered some old friends and was out for lunch, so she was free to accept.

Madame had accomplished their shopping as well as her own, quite refusing to allow them to buy more than a day's supply of anything. Chris, dazzled by Harrods', remarked that Buckingham Palace couldn't be finer: and was admiringly sarcastic about "that wan," as she insisted on calling Madame Mathilde. It was quite impossible to turn such a wild bird as Chris into the conventional servant.

"It was grand to see her humbuggin' them men an' gettin' what she wanted. Even the black-coated swell they called up couldn't do anything but give in to her. You noticed how

she lost her English over them mushrooms. A shillin' an' eightpence a pound indeed for what you wouldn't pick up in Ireland. She's great value, that wan! I'm dyin', Miss Bitha, to know what she'll make of her rag . . . what was it? It's well she might call it a rag, wid all them bits o' things in it. I'll learn it from her maybe, an' maybe, if I'm civil, she'll learn me to make an omelette. The old cook in the last place I run from ..."—Chris had quite a record of running away from places before she took Bitha and her father into a heart as faithful as a dog's-" sent up what she called an omelette,-but the master, a very scornfulspoken man, says, 'What's this? You don't call this an omelette. It's a batter puddin'.' I've thought ever since that I'd like to know how to make an omelette."

"I am sure Madame would be pleased to teach you, Chris," Bitha answered.

The ragout was indeed most excellent, and so was the omelette which followed, and the little bit of fruit, and the fragrant coffee. A king might have found the delicate meal to his liking, although it might be a trifle exiguous. The little room was ascetically clean and bare, but very pleasant, with its baby grand piano, its few books and pictures, its polished floor, with one or two bright rugs laid upon it.

Madame was simply pleased at the tale of Chris's admiration for her and her desire to learn how to make an omelette.

"It is not for the English, that art," she said. "They are excellent people, but the omelette is not within their powers. It will be a pudding or a soufflé,—not an omelette. But the little one there, of so bright an intelligence, with the nose that points to the stars, the eyes so bright, the face so small and pale,—she has the soul for the cuisine. I will teach her, moi! She shall see me prepare the omelette, the vol-au-vent, the fricandeau, the ragout. She will be an artist, that one."

It was great news for Chris, who catechised Bitha minutely on the matter of the meal she had had.

She had set out the tea cups: the kettle was singing; as was Chris in her kitchen. Bitha was sitting on the hearthrug making toast, for Papa had said he'd be in to tea: the reading-lamp was lit and the light fell pleasantly on the snowy paper, the pens and ink laid to Colonel O'Grady's hand, for he had been persuaded by Bitha to make a trial of writing his Reminiscences. "Only I warn you, Bitha," he had said, "that I'll tell nobody's secrets, nor will I gossip."

"We'll have to do without that," Bitha had

answered seriously,—" but you'll have plenty left."

The bell rang. Bitha had just said to herself that Papa must have forgotten to take his latch-key. Chris had opened the door. Bitha, laying down the toasting fork, had just turned about to greet her beloved. But it was not Papa who came in. It was the Duchess. Chris was saying in amazed tones:

"There's a lady, Miss, that says she's the Duchess of some place or other; I couldn't ketch the name."

The Duchess was holding Bitha's two hands in her ungloved ones.

"My dear," she said, "I was in your neighbourhood and I felt that I must come and see you. That perfectly charming father of yours—I shall so like to meet him again. Manners are not dead while he lives. And you, my dear,—I wished to meet you again and hear how your plans are progressing. I hope I have not come at an inconvenient time?"

"Oh, indeed no," Bitha replied. "I am expecting Papa in for tea. He will be so delighted. I hope you can stay for tea?"

The Duchess had thrown open her fur.

"I should like to stay," she said. "What a pretty restful room. Very different from where I last met you!"

She put out her hands to the fire as though

they were cold.

"I was quite surprised to find you and your father in that galère," she went on. "I wondered why Mrs. Pendray should have asked me to go. The man seemed a worthy intelligent man, although somewhat bumptious. But the lady—I am bad at remembering names—seemed a vulgar person. I suppose they are very new."

Bitha got red, but, of course, that was not visible to the Duchess. Before she could make up her mind to speak there was the sound of her father's latch-key in the hall-door and Patsy sprang up, alert and quivering, her tail wagging hard.

"What a quaint little dog," said the Duchess; and Patsy turned an eye like a wet blackberry on her as though she knew what was said, as doubtless she did.

Then Colonel O'Grady was in the room and bowing over the Duchess's hand with a fine old-fashioned courtesy,—Bitha had seen him as courteous to a ragged tramping woman, when he stepped into the road to leave her the path,—so she was spared from enlightening the Duchess, which would have been an awkward thing to do.

CHAPTER IX

FAIRY STORIES

"I BELIEVE my tall fair daughter-in-law is giving a dance in about a month's time," said the Dowager, "I have spoken to her about you and your perfectly delightful plan. My dear, I can see by this room that you are going to succeed. She would like you to do her suppertables and advise about the rooms."

Bitha felt a little alarmed now the thing was upon her. She had spent a good many days studying colour-schemes and effects, in all manner of places, from the West End shopwindows to the National Gallery and the Print Room of the British Museum. She had turned over many portfolios. One of these days perhaps, if her cunning did not fail her, she would extend the scope of her work towards the designing of costumes. Meanwhile she studied fabrics that had a decorative value, tissues, coloured linens, velvets, silks. She

thought of the colours of the flowers and the trees. She had it in her mind to be more than the lady who arranged the flowers.

The Dowager had taken her to see her "tall fair daughter-in-law." Bitha had been very nervous about the interview and very much afraid of what she had undertaken, but the young Duchess very soon put her at her ease.

She was a most beautiful young woman, like a slim angel, her pallor just lightly tinged with rose, her hair pale-gold and softly curling. A white and golden boy and girl were sitting on a silken quilt on the floor of the boudoir as Bitha and the Dowager entered, their mother reading to them.

She jumped up as they came in, and the children rushed to their granny.

"Mummie's been reading us a book about manners by a lady who never knew us," said the boy, who was looking rather flushed. "And—Granny, she knew everything we did that was wrong. How did she know it?"

"I expect she knows a great many little girls and boys," said the Dowager, who was being folded into a warm embrace by the tall young white and gold angel.

"This is a friend I have brought you, Angela," said the Dowager, emerging from the embrace and looking very happy. It was plain to see that she was not just a dowdy old lady to her own family. "She is Bitha O'Grady, who is going to be a decorative artist. I want her to do your ball-room and supper table for you. For the 15th—is it?"

Looking at the young Duchess, Bitha had a sudden vision of her walking white and golden against a blue Italian sky, a background of

pillars and arched windows.

"There will be just the flowers for the ball-room," said the young Duchess. "That, as you know, Mamma, decorates itself. I shall be delighted to have Miss O'Grady for the flowers. I am always pulling the florist's designs about after they are done and spoiling the poor man's work completely. It will be so nice to have you, Miss O'Grady. Will you please order your flowers the day before and come in early on the morning of the 15th? And I hope you won't think it necessary to refrain from dancing. When you have thought out your colour-scheme we must let Gunther's know so that they can fall in with it for the sweets and ices."

Bitha began to think that her way was being made almost too smooth for her. The young Duchess was so charming, and the children, after looking at her shyly for a few minutes,— Ursula, the little girl, with her finger in her mouth,—suddenly made up their minds that she was the right sort of person and came forward with the most delicious friendliness, ready to show her their toys and animals, the baby brother, the ponies on which they rode in the Park, and all their treasured possessions.

She went away with them to the nursery after tea and had a good romp, aided and abetted by a cheerful youngish Nanna, while the Dowager and her daughter-in-law talked. In the midst of the romp, when Bitha was on the floor, Hugh and Ursula climbing over her like a pair of frolicsome puppies, the door opened and the young Duchess came in. She stood in the doorway smiling at what she saw, while Bitha freed herself from the boisterous youngsters and got to her feet.

"I say, what a jolly good rag you're having," said her Grace slangily, while the children hurled themselves upon her.

"They are dears," said Bitha, looking up

shyly.

"I'm afraid you'll think us all very badly behaved," said the Duchess. "I'm afraid the Duke and I spoil our children, to say nothing of their granny."

The Dowager was ready to go, so they went downstairs, leaving the children to their books

and bed. Bitha, who was susceptible, was rather in love with the whole family.

"I give you carte blanche about the flowers and anything you require," said the Duchess, holding Bitha's hand in a warm clasp at parting. "It was so clever of Mamma to find you and so kind of her to bring you. You don't know what a weight of anxiety you are going to take off my mind. And, you must enjoy my ball. I shall see to it that you do."

It was a fairy-tale. Was it thus that great ladies treated the young woman who came to do the flowers? That was how Bitha described herself in her own mind. She felt she would do anything to please that beautiful young Duchess who had so soft a voice and so gay and kind a manner.

"Now, that is all settled," said the Dowager.

"Is it your first commission, child?"

"I have one for the 20th at Lady Marcia Bosanquet's."

"Ah, they are very rich people, the Bosanquets. They own a deal of London. Make your terms stiff, child. You'll excuse the liberty I take. They'll think the more about you the stiffer you are."

"Shan't I have to prove myself?"

"Tut! Not a bit of it! Make them give you plenty of flowers—and ribbons, and what-

ever you want. You couldn't go far wrong with plenty of flowers, but you won't go wrong at all."

"I should love to do it for love."

"That would be a great mistake with people like the Bosanquets, whose duty it is to spend and not hoard their money. If you want to do anything for love, come and help to decorate the crêche in Mildmay Street for its Christmas Tea and Tree Party. Mildmay Street's not far from you. Come and see it to-morrow morning before you begin work. I'll call for you."

"It will be lovely to help," Bitha said with

shining eyes and glowing cheeks.

They were getting on now into the depths of Fulham, sitting side by side in the Dowager's little brougham, which she kept when the rest of the world was buying motors, because neither the coachman nor the horse was quite old enough for superannuation.

"By and bye," she said, explaining this to Bitha, "London will be impossible for horsetraffic, and I can pack off Wilkes and the charger to Mayston and keep them for country work. It will be a sort of superannuation, but they won't feel it so much, poor dears."

"Another thing I want to ask you about," said the Dowager at Bitha's ear. "You will

want frocks, child, going to these places. It is important that you should look as though you did the work for love."

"I have one pretty frock which my cousin Cynthia gave me. I mean one pretty new

frock."

"Ah, that was the abrupt, mannish girl who saw that I got my tea on Sunday, else I should have been overlooked. Piquant that, the black brows with the fair hair. I liked her better than her sister. By the way, my dear, I owe you an apology. I had no idea these people were your relatives. I fear I must have seemed very rude."

"Uncle William has been very good to us,—and Cynthia was really kind,—after the first, when she had made up her mind about me. She told me herself that she always went against Rosamund, and since Rosamund did not like me, she did. But I think she is better than that."

"I daresay. I expect she takes after her father. He, too, is better than he thinks. There's good in him under his bumptiousness. There's no use concealing my impressions, since I told them all to you the other day. I wouldn't have done it, of course, if I'd known. Will your aunt see to your frocks?"

"Oh no," said Bitha. "If Uncle William

thought of it he would give me money, but not Aunt Alice. But now I am very well off with that lovely frock Cynthia gave me. Wasn't she good? She gave me everything to wear with it too."

"H'm! I daresay she's got lots to give her maid You'll soon be independent of anyone, but meanwhile, while you wait for that, let me be your Fairy Godmother. It is something I often do for girls. Now don't thank me. Be a good girl and remember me in your prayers. That will be the best thanks you can give me."

At this point the carriage stopped at the little gate of Tempe, which gave no indication of the cosy prettiness that, for the present, at least, marked the rooms within.

"Tell me," said the Dowager, coming in for a book she had left behind a few days earlier, "if you were to make your fortune at this business of yours, and your father's Reminiscences were to prove as valuable as Lady Quilliam's, what would you do with the fortune when it was made?"

"Go back to Castle O'Grady," said Bitha

promptly.

"I thought as much. You are impossible, you Irish. All we can do for you is as naught compared with your spiritual country of

mountains and bogs. You are always homesick

in your hearts."

"Always," said Bitha. "It might have been written of us: 'By the waters of Babylon we sat down and wept, because we remembered Zion.'"

Then she told the sympathetic friend about that mirage of the Board, at last, taking over Farrakilly, Farrafore and Farragolden, and paying down for the three townlands a sum which would put Castle O'Grady on its feet and enable its owners to live in it.

"Of course it is only a fairy-story," she

ended mournfully.

"Fairy-stories often come true," said the Dowager. "I should go on dreaming about it if I were you."

CHAPTER X

BITHA'S FIRST APPEARANCE

BITHA had made her début. She had taken her courage in both hands and had suggested to Lady Marcia Bosanquet that the Japanese fan decorations of her ball-room were entirely out of keeping with the Ionic pillars and balustrading of the beautiful room, which belonged to a fine old Regency house.

"Oh, I know," said Lady Marcia wearily. "They are atrocious. It was the idea of my husband's mother. Everything was Japanesy

in those days."

Lady Marcia Bosanquet was a beautiful dark, dissatisfied-looking woman, who, rumour said, had married the rich man for her family's sake when she would very much rather have married a penniless young soldier. "Perhaps if you were to talk to Mr. Bosanquet, my dear compatriote, he would listen." She had an odd way of calling Bitha her "dear compatriote." Bitha

liked her immensely. She trailed about in beautiful garments, and her eyes were like melancholy stars, but she had a rare laughter that was worth waiting for. Bitha had called it forth very early in their acquaintance, and it had been so pleasant that she found herself trying again to provoke it.

All that was unusual in the family came from the lady. Mr. Bosanquet was very newly plutocratic; he was a tremendous Conservative and a believer in the rights of property, which he was ever ready to insist upon. To hear him talk about the Game Laws and the iniquity of poaching and the discontent of the working-classes in a broad Lancashire accent, with the speech, or the suggestion of the speech, of a mill-hand, was something worth while. He was supposed to have served as the model of John Bullivant in the play "The Yorkshire Man," written by the famous Mr. William Carrigan.

He had an obstinate mouth and a jaw that closed like iron (which he had not transmitted to his children), but his obstinacy was not for common occasions. As a rule he allowed his beautiful wife, of whom he was very proud, and his children, to do pretty well what they pleased, and to dip as freely as they liked, so long as it was for a legitimate purpose, into his moneybags.

Many people thought Mr. Bosanquet a very alarming person. His own family were not afraid of him. He was a very indulgent father. At only one thing would he have drawn the line, and that was at the secret desire of his daughter's heart to enter a sister-hood. Mr. Bosanquet's religion was the religion of a very plain man. It had no imaginative heights or depths. Mary had never dared to mention the sisterhood in his presence.

It was this indomitable gentleman whom Bitha tackled on the subject of the Japanese decorations of the ball-room. He had been very kind to Bitha when she had come to lunch, to make a preliminary tour of the house. In fact, he was rather tickled at the idea of Bitha taking charge of the decorations for the ball.

"Why, you're nobbut a lass," he said, and lay back in his chair to laugh, which he did with a gurgling and chuckling unusual in polite society.

However, he showed that he liked her very much by taking her round the house himself. In the ball-room they stood in the centre of the polished floor and looked up at the stuccoed walls of a rich deep cream-colour, with a design of classic figures in gilding. The ceiling was painted with cupids and rose-garlands, by, it was said, Angelica Kauffmann.

Looking up, Bitha could have groaned at what she saw. There were curtains at the long windows of a pagoda and dragon design, well enough in themselves, but an impertinence in the stately classicism of the room. Above the cornice there were innumerable Japanese fans, mingled with Chinese plates. Kakemonos hung on the wide creamy spaces of the wall. Japanese screens stood in the fireplaces and bigger editions of them about the room. The chairs and the settees were flimsy and Japanese. The black and gold of a lac cabinet, the vivid scarlet of a tall screen, were eyesores in the tranquil room. Even the embroideries, some of which were beautiful, were painfully out of place.

"Now this I call a pretty room," said Mr.

Bosanquet.

Bitha shook her head. Her little face was full of dissent.

"What! You don't like it?" Mr. Bosanquet said incredulously. "I couldn't have believed it of you, Missie. Some of these things cost my father a pretty penny." He waved his hand toward the lac cabinet and then towards a pair of tall green dragon vases which stood either side the fireplace. "The fans up there were the idea of one to whom I owe all love and honour, my mother."

Bitha felt oddly touched.

"Of course all those things would be charming," she said, "in another room. This one requires so little in the way of decoration. It is a pity to decorate it at all: but if you must have something I should have just oval mirrors or water-colour portraits in oval frames. But the room really decorates itself. Just look at that lovely ceiling."

"My mother didn't much like it," said Mr. Bosanquet. "She was very particular. And so you don't think these things good enough for the room, not what the man that built the house would like, eh?"

"I'm afraid not," said Bitha, sticking to her guns. "Some of the things are beautiful, but not here, not for this room. Others,—all this furniture for example, and the screens,—are fitter for a smoking-room, or a corridor perhaps, a modern corridor."

"You tell me so? Do you think, Missie, that people coming to see this room would think that her who thought it beautiful was mistaken?"

"I think it very probable," said Bitha.

"Well, it is your job, Missie, and I suppose you know it. A man told me the other day that this was one of the most perfect late Georgian houses in London,—he said something

about French taste having a say in everything then. I wouldn't like that people should think she spoilt anything of it. The Japanese decorations can go."

It was a Pyrrhic victory for Bitha, who could have wept at the dejection of his face, but it was a great joy to his family, who set to work to remove the offending East from the classical room.

"I can remember my Grannie," said Edward Bosanguet. "She cleared out of this house to a very tiny cottage near Dorking. She used to have plush beetles walking up her curtains."

"People make such simple pleasures for themselves," remarked his mother, lifting her thin, highly arched brows. "After all, the plush beetles were preferable to Billikins and such monstrosities of the present day."

"What will you do with all that Japanese rubbish?" asked Edward, who was his mother's favourite. "Scrap it on a dustheap? hold a jumble sale?"

"No, indeed. I shall have a Japanese room, and it shall be sacred to your father. He will be happy with the things his mother liked."

The room was to be ready for decoration by the morning of the ball. As Bitha, overwhelmed by the family with congratulations upon her diplomacy, was leaving, she chanced upon a touching little scene, quite by accident. Lady Marcia and her husband came out from the ball-room and went towards the stair-head.

"If you really minded I would not permit any alteration," said the lady, in her softest tones. "I am sure the poor darling mother would not mind. She was so sweet always about wanting to give up her way for another's."

"You should have told me it was wrong before, Marcia," said the rich man, humbly. "Neither her nor me would be above taking advice."

After all the marriage had been worth while,

apparently.

Bitha came to her decorating to find the ball-room remodelled. The walls were bare except for a beautiful Gainsborough lady above the fireplace. It was lit from above by concealed lights that ran round the moulding where the Japanese fans had been. Against the walls were gilt French, high-backed fauteuils and chairs upholstered in striped pale blue damask. The same material draped the long windows. The room needed nothing else.

She had lain awake at night thinking over her colour-scheme. It was her very first occasion, and she felt that much depended on her success. She had visited Messrs. Winterbourne, the florists, and had been received by a gentle-

man who usually advised on matters of decoration. His idea was masses of pale pink roses. At the suggestion Bitha wisely shook her head. Only the youngest débutante could bear it.

When she suggested somewhat timidly a scheme of white and gold Mr. Wilson was not encouraging. He was a little supercilious in his manner towards Bitha, who came in her everyday frock. White and gold he declared was too cold for the season. Gold-yes, he conceded gold. Daffodils were to be had, but they were forced ones, and narcissi had come in from the Riviera and the Scilly Islands. It had been a mild winter and there were snowdrops already in many shrubberies.

Bitha ordered lilies of the valley in baskets and bowls for her tables, with an abundance of snowdrops. White and gold ribbons must suggest the stronger notes of colour. The long dining-room ending in a palm-house made the supper-room, with a marquee added. In the dining-room itself the light came from great chandeliers of many glittering stalactites overhead. The tables were lit by cream-shaded candles, each rising from its basket of lilies of the valley. About the room should be stacked masses of white hyacinths for their sweetness. Ribbons of white and green strengthened the colour-note.

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In the Palm House, where already there was the green for background, Bitha saw her decorations of banks of violets and snowdrops, while in the marquee daffodils and narcissi were to make colour and sweetness.

She had her little difficulties with Mr. Wilson, who wanted something much more elaborate, but finally, on Bitha's announcement of her intention to purchase at Covent Garden in the early morning, Mr. Wilson capitulated. He did, indeed, quite fall in with Bitha's idea of decorating the ball-room with trees and plants rather than flowers, and the formal little orange-trees with the fruit upon them which stood between the pillars of the ball-room, he considered to be in keeping with the room, which required so little decoration.

Lady Marcia thought it was all charming when it was done, but Bitha in her blue smock, regarding her handiwork with misgiving, had dreams of Castle O'Grady in spring with the pale green trees, airy and delicate, trooping upon the lake, of the hay-fields all white and gold, of the overgrown gardens with the riot of colour in the herbaceous border; poppies and gladioli, delphinium and sweet-william, turn-cap lilies and phlox and columbines. She said to herself regretfully that no one could do it in a

London ball-room or supper-room. And for this Winter festivity she must have nothing that did not bring the Spring.

So she kept to the sweet-smelling flowers.

Lady Marcia had given her carte blanche as to what she might use, and she found many beautiful things, hidden away in forgotten pantries and china closets, graceful pitchers of brass, bits of silver and china and faience. Three silver ships most delicately modelled were the very things for the three larger tables of the supper-room, and each went to sea with hyacinths white and purple for cargo. The butler was at first a little resentful when Bitha invaded his domain, and the housekeeper did not think she could possibly produce the many articles the young lady wanted, especially with the chef demanding so many things and keeping so many people waiting on him; for he seemed to superintend like a specialist, rather than to do anything himself.

But Bitha had a way with servants, and very soon the pantry-boy and a young footman were polishing up the hidden treasures of silver and brass, while Mrs. Preedy, the housekeeper, was taking out glass and china and agreeing that it was a pity they should not be shown.

Then there were the beautiful old chintzes and brocades which Lady Marcia and Bitha

had chosen together, and they gave the note of colour to the noble serenity of the stately rooms.

When all was done, and Bitha, weary after a hard day's work, listened to Lady Marcia's praises of what she called the originality of Bitha's ideas, she protested that it was just the beautiful things she had been able to put together that made the success. Lady Marcia was crying out over long forgotten treasures, and things she had not known the house to contain. The silver ships specially delighted her. They had been in her family for three centuries.

"To think that I ate my dinner without them all those years," she said. "That is one of the drawbacks of possessing two houses. When you want something very badly it is always sure to be in the other. But all that beautiful spiral glass, my dear, and the Venetian bowls, and the Waterford glass Art treasures!"

These latter finds Bitha had placed in the shelves of the white and gold cupboards in the bow-shaped alcoves of the ball-room. They caught the reflection from the chandeliers and sent out rays of light from the recesses.

Bitha retired under the light of Lady Marcia's approval, to reappear in Cynthia's white frock, from which her red curls emerged like Autumn

leaves on snow, only that Autumn leaves were never borne so prettily, once they had left the tree, as was Bitha's head on the slender young neck.

When she came downstairs the guests had begun to arrive. Standing unseen in the gallery over the hall she watched them enter and pass on their way to the cloak-rooms. As the ladies came up the stairs they passed quite close to the screen behind which she had hidden herself. There was a soft swishing of silk, a warm scented air, as they went on their way.

Suddenly she heard a voice that she recognised. It was Lady Orme's. She was saying to someone as she passed:

"Yes,-my husband's niece has done the flowers. It was rather against our wish that she should. . . ."

The rest was lost.

Bitha was suddenly shy. She had an impulse to flee to her bedroom and remain there unless somebody missed her,—which was an unlikely thing,—and came to look for her and give her courage. After all—what did she do here as a guest? She had found on her dressing-table an envelope enclosing a ten-pound Bank of England note-" With Lady Marcia Bosanquet's compliments and thanks." She had had an absurd impulse to re-address the note and leave it, but she reminded herself sternly that she was now a working woman. Of course, Lady Marcia had overpaid her. It was not likely she would pay the florist's young man at that extravagant rate. She would explain to her that it was a business transaction, that she did not desire more than anyone else would receive for the like pleasant work. Was it a success? Or were they only being polite about it? Had she been too extravagant with the flowers and the ribbon? That bank of violets had cost a mighty sum to Bitha's mind, but that had been Lady Marcia's idea; and the ribbon had not been cut and could be used again. It would not even be soiled.

In a lull of the procession on the staircase she escaped to the musician's gallery above the ball-room. At each end of it was a curtained recess like a box at the theatre. She could see the ball-room from there without showing her face among all those strangers.

She was securely seated and was looking down intently at the maze of colour and movement below, so glad to have escaped the crowd. She could see Rosamund dancing with Edward Bosanquet, and her Aunt Alice seated among the dowagers on the raised dais. Cynthia she could not see. Mary Bosanquet threaded her way round the room, held up now and again

by someone who wanted a dance, and at last reached the dais where she sat down beside Lady Orme, who seemed rather lonely, and talked with her. There was her friend of that first evening at Queen's Gate, Geoffrey Pendray, not dancing. While she watched he went to a girl sitting by the wall and asked for a dance.

His being there made the atmosphere more friendly. Bitha had not been to Queen's Gate again, although Uncle William had been to Tempe more than once, and had expressed the opinion that Bitha's little drawing-room was more homelike than any room in his house. She began to wonder if she could find courage to enter the ball-room alone and steal in behind Aunt Alice and the dowagers.

Suddenly the door behind her opened and Tom Bosanquet, the Eton boy, whose acquaintance she had just made, showed a curly head and a cheerful, freckled face.

"Got the hoo-hoos, Miss O'Grady, eh? I caught sight of you from downstairs and I thought I'd come and look after you. Mind, I bag the supper-time. I don't mind how many people I take in. Here's your cousin, Jim Orme. I don't know why I haven't got such nice cousins as he has."

The second boy came forward to the front of the box and the light fell on his golden head

Suddenly Bitha realized why it was that his family, even Rosamund, adored Jim.

"Will you give me the pleasure of a dance, Cousin Bitha?" said the golden-haired boy.

"With pleasure, Cousin Jim," Bitha replied, and said to herself that, of course, Queen's Gate would be very different with Jim there. Only -how did such a boy as Jim come to be Aunt Alice's son ?—for the matter of that to be Uncle William's? There was such an odd radiant sweetness about Jim Orme.

He was holding her hand to assist her up the few steps, and Tom Bosanquet was grumbling that Orme had not played fair, getting before him like that, but that nevertheless he bagged supper-time and he never could see anything in dancing.

So Bitha danced with Jim Orme, who knew a good deal more about the latest dances than she did. As they passed the dais where Aunt Alice was now talking to an immensely fat old lady whose corsage shone like a sun with precious stones, she noticed that Aunt Alice fumbled for her lorgnette. They had passed on before she found it; but Bitha had a shrewd surmise that Aunt Alice's face of maternal pleasure in her son would have been cold for her.

CHAPTER XI

THE SONG IN THE STREET

It had been a delightful first appearance for Bitha. She had left the ball-room even earlier than Cinderella and had been taken home in the Bosanquet motor to Melisande Road, where she found her father sitting up, with hot chocolate ready for her.

She had disappointed various young men besides Tom Bosanquet, who had "bagged" the supper hour all in vain and had been inconsolable when she told him she must go. She had danced with Geoffrey Pendray, whom she had come upon in a corridor with her cousin Cynthia, and again with Jim, who was so careful and gentle in steering her. Then suddenly she had had a desire for Papa and to tell him all about it. Perhaps Aunt Alice's, "You here, Bitha! And dancing!" might have had something to do with the sudden desire. Certainly the dowagers had seemed to

turn a perfect forest of lorgnettes on Bitha, but that probably was only her imagination. She was "gun-shy" of that formidable weapon, the lorgnette, she said to her father, sitting down, a soft billowy mass of white, on the rug before the good fire his careful love had kept for her.

Twelve o'clock had struck from a church-clock as Bitha drew near to Fulham. Her father was happily industrious. He had taken to writing his Reminiscences as a duck takes to the water. He had accumulated quite a little pile of manuscript by this time, and Bitha was looking about her for a typist. Papa's interlined manuscript would never do to submit to a publisher. Besides, as Bitha said, it might be quite valuable some day.

The Reminiscences were a secret between Papa and Bitha, for the present. The people at Queen's Gate, except perhaps Cynthia—and Jim—would have thought it a very foolish idea. Sir William had decided that it ought not to be difficult to find a job for a distinguished soldier like Hercules O'Grady—and was wirepulling at the War-Office. No use telling him that an old soldier, with a bullet-wound in his leg and a recurring malaria, was not a very eligible person for a job. Sir William would always think he knew better.

Bitha thought the Reminiscences beautiful.

Papa was re-creating the world he had lost, with a real zest in it. It seemed a very gay world to Bitha, that world which Papa had lost, where nobody pressed for money, and people took their debts as a joke, where no one ever thought that the days of feasting might lead to days of fasting for somebody.

Papa always had to read the last bit he had done for his daughter's approval. He was still in the gay irresponsible days when the gentry jigged in their castles and their ragged retainers jigged on their own account; when if famine came, and fever, the gentry and the people suffered together. An impossible, even a reprehensible time, but how friendly and how gay!

"Oh, Papa,—it is like a chapter from Castle Rackrent," said Bitha, her two hands clasped about her knees, which were up to her chin,

her face looking at him all eagerness.

She was thinking how young and well Papa looked. He had been so fretted for Castle O'Grady before these blessed Reminiscences began. Now he seemed to be living in the old days. Sometimes his quill-pen scratched away madly as though it could not get down his memories fast enough. Bitha was inclined to think that they went—with a swing. She longed for an expert judgment, but if she could

have got one Papa would have been too shy. The coming-in of a critic might have brought self-consciousness, to dry up the pleasant flow from Papa's pen.

"You like it really, Bitha? Not just because it is mine? Sometimes I think I will write it all down and then destroy it. It would not be waste time even then. I am young while I am at it."

"You will make other people young," said Bitha, wisely. "Think of these people over here. They love Irish humour when they can get it. Imagine them taking Mr. ——"—she named a highly-praised writer—"as an Irish humorist. They don't laugh, but they feel they ought to. We've been telling them for so long that they're stupid, and they are goodnaturedly willing to believe there's a joke they can't see in every line of 'the new Irish humorist'! No Irishman ever laughs, though."

"You think it will really amuse people, Bitha?" Hercules O'Grady asked wistfully.

"It will delight them. Some of it is as good as Somerville and Ross—you can't do much better than that—and it's all true."

"Ah, well, if that is so, I shall be like good old Father Cassidy, who liked to see the people sleeping during his sermon, for then he felt he had given some poor people a rest."

"That was a height of saintliness beyond many saints," said Bitha, and laughed.

One o'clock struck from Fulham church tower. The night was very quiet. When Bitha came in it had been snowing. It wanted six days of Christmas, which seemed likely enough to be a white Christmas. Everybody was abed. Melisande Road of late had had a new discord added to its noises, in the carolsingers, irreverent small boys who scuffled for pennies and sang the beautiful old words with a Cockney accent that affronted them. It was good to have the night quiet.

"It is a beautiful fire," said Bitha, "I hate leaving it. It seems such an injury to take it down and extinguish all those glowing

colours."

"If a man, a woman and a Child should knock at the door one of these nights we should have to take them in," said Hercules O'Grady, suddenly.

He must have been thinking of the snow outside, and those who might be homeless and cold and hungry. Or perhaps he was thinking of the cabins in Ireland that keep an open door on Christmas Eve lest Poor Travellers should ask a shelter and turn to the cattle-shed as once before.

As though his words had brought it, there

suddenly rang out the strains of the "Adeste Fidelis," quite close at hand.

"That is no common carol singer," said he, getting to his feet. "It is a good voice—a great voice. What does the owner of such a voice do with it that he must sing in the winter streets at an hour after midnight?"

He went to the hall-door and set it wide. Bitha followed, having wrapped herself up in the Indian shawl which had been a present to her grandmother from Queen Victoria.

The singer was still a little way off. The snow had come on more quickly and the light of the street lamps was obscured. The voice was like golden rain—like an angel's singing on Christmas night. Bitha only arrived just in time to see her father, bare-headed, disappear into the snow. She held the door and stood peering out, waiting his return. A timely remembrance of her satin shoes had arrested her on the very edge of following him.

The hymn went on to its close. There was a pause. Then came two figures through the snow, her father's and that of a very big man, wrapped in a heavy coat, who shook himself free of the snow before he stepped over the tiny threshold into the hall.

At the sight of Bitha off came his soft hat. He bowed profoundly, unlike an islander. He was

so big that he seemed to fill the hall. His head all but touched the ceiling, and he had to be very careful to avoid the swinging lamp.

"My friends, this is so amiable," he said. "I have sung down three roads as long as this. It is a fr-r-r-ightful night. What cold! But

your little house is warm!"

He spoke in deep rich tones and with a foreign accent. He had taken off his coat. Bitha noticed with some wonder that it was fur-lined. He followed her into the sittingroom and stood looking about him, smiling.

"Oh, but," he said, and stretched his hands to the fire, "there is not another such room as this in all these parts. What a fire! And what hospitality! How do you know but that I am a brigand, my friends? Do you so open your door to any rascal that sings at midnight?"

His bright eyes, his white teeth, the flashing smile which lit the dark face were not at all

insular. Suddenly he was serious.

"Ah," he said, "you keep a memory of Some who were homeless at Christmas. That is why you open the door to a night-bird such as I."

The bright eyes that surely missed nothing, had caught a glimpse of Bitha's little Crib, brought among the treasures from Castle O'Grady. There was an innocent Stable with a pane of red glass at the back through which a light was to shine. There was the cattle's bed of hay, and the Bambino: the Mother and the foster father; the kings and shepherds; the kneeling beasts.

Ever since Bitha could remember, her Crib had been set out for her in Christmas Week and lit on Christmas Eve. It was as yet dark.

"Ah, the adored Bambino!" said the stranger and made something like a salutation.

Bitha was busy preparing him some hot chocolate. When she would have produced some solid food he held his hand.

"I have not yet done my pilgrimage," he said. "I have still to sing my way down Melisande Road to the very end."

"We can give you a shake-down for the night," said Hercules O'Grady. "Do not go out into the bitter night again. The people will be all asleep. They will dream that they hear the angels singing . . ."

"But that is what I come for," said the visitor, sipping his chocolate. "It is a vow, my friends,—do you see?"

" A vow?"

"I am Luigi Vasari." He named one of the greatest of singers. "Twenty-two years ago I was picked up in the streets, where I sang to

keep life in my little mother. She was dying of the cold and the hunger. My singing saved her, and she is back in Italy and as merry as a bird. The man who picked me out of the street gave me my chance. He saved my mother's life. Every Christmas since I have sung in these streets, and the money given to me I give to the poor. You think Melisande Road sleeps. But it is awake, behind its lit blinds. One door after another opens when I sing, and one after another comes out and gives me money. I do not take the money of Melisande Road. But I sing sometimes in a street of the rich and I have money rained on me. All that I give to the poor."

"We are greatly honoured to have received

you," said Hercules O'Grady.

"I am honoured by your reception," Vasari returned. "Many adventures fall to me when I keep my vow. Sometime I shall make a book of them. There is not one more agreeable than this. It is the very Charity of Christmas."

They talked a little longer. Wonderful how words rushed to their lips, so that there were no pauses but warm meetings of the spirit.

"But you will come back," Hercules O'Grady insisted. "You shall have my bed and I shall sleep on the sofa. With a voice like yours it is not right that you should be exposed to the

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bitter night. We shall wait for you till you return and have all in readiness."

"No, no, my friend," Vasari answered, with his air of eagerness. "I shall sing my way down Melisande Road and the people will think of the First Christmas. By the last house my motor awaits me, with a chauffeur so patient. I am whisked home and into a hot bath. It will not hurt my voice to sing the Adeste. One does not take harm when one keeps the vow. But we shall meet again. I shall not forget the so gracious hospitality. I shall come and sing for this young lady, all for herself, as many songs as she will."

He bowed himself out into the night, running back once or twice to take their hands in his and clasp them warmly, bowing over them. At last he was gone, and they heard him beginning to sing a little further down the street. They listened till the glorious voice had died away in distance and Melisande Road was quiet for the few hours during which it slept.

CHAPTER XII

THE THING IN THE FOG

THE day after the wonderful visit was foggy, and the fog persisted more or less right up to Christmas, dislocating the traffic and the business of the great town. It was black fog, which Bitha found peculiarly terrifying. When she went into the streets beyond the range of the lit shops she could only move about with the protection of her hearing, since sight was blinded. The artificial light all day and the choky atmosphere had a depressing effect on Bitha, who loved the air and the sunlight.

Her father went out to his Club as usual, having worked steadily through the morning-hours. He made splendid progress. Bitha loved and praised what flowed so readily from his fingers and his brain; and encouraged by her approval he wrote till she had to restrain him, telling him he had done enough for the day. He would look up at her half-unwillingly,

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when she laid her hand on his writing-pad, and the mists of dreams would be in his eyes.

"You were quite right, Bitha," he said, on one of these occasions. "I am living in those days when I was young and in love with your mother."

Bitha knew the story of that love affair, when Hercules O'Grady, the dashing young subaltern in a Lancer regiment, had fallen in love with the prim Quakerish girl who had been governess in a house where he visited, a love born of pity and sympathy with the girl whose employer was a hard and insolent woman of fashion.

Lady Greenacre's governess certainly did not spring from aristocracy. Her family had not yet emerged from the little house at Streatham, from which the daughters went forth as governesses while the only son, in a Government office, dreamed dreams of power and riches and looked about him for the woman whose fortune should set him on the road to success.

The governess had had more in her than her family had ever suspected, ever would suspect. To her, Hercules O'Grady was a dazzling Fairy Prince, and she the Cinderella to whom he stooped. The romance had lasted to the day of her death for her, and for him had outlived her. He might have married again, advantageously from a worldly point of view, but he

did not think of such a thing. Elizabeth O'Grady was to reign in her husband's faithful heart to its last beat.

The dream of her and youth was in Hercules O'Grady's eyes as he looked up at his daughter.

"You take me out of a world where it is always May to this inferno of perpetual night," he grumbled. "I could have gone on for hours."

"And tired yourself out. Fortunately the Tube Station is so near here, and so near your Club at the other end. Go and talk to your cronies and come back in time for dinner. I shall not expect you till I see you."

He coughed. The wretched fog and smoke had got into his throat. It was no wonder. Despite the fact that people had been so kind to them and so many pleasant things had happened, London at this moment was a moving phantasmagoria. Bitha could not imagine how anyone could choose to live in this pall of smoke, surrounded by the strange shadow-shapes that emerged from the fog only to be engulfed again.

He went off obediently to his Piccadilly Club, and the house was left to Bitha and Chris and Patsy, who had accepted even the perpetual night as something in the day's work, that did not matter so long as she was with the people she adored.

About four o'clock Bitha, who had been writing Christmas letters, took a little pile and went out to post them, Patsy accompanying her with barks of a joyous excitement. Patsy was the more reconciled to London that she was a dog of great sociability and interest in her kind. She had tricks that amazed the London dogs, inherited doubtless from the poodle ancestor who might have been a performing dog in a circus. To see Patsy leap a tennis-net was pure delight.

Here in London, where tennis-nets were not available, she was wont to accomplish the same elegant curve in air over a gutter or a muddy place, to the gaping admiration of the English dogs. She had a disquieting habit of regarding every street-fight between dogs as her fight till she was into it. That was the Irish terrier strain in her. The poodle strain made her scream to get out as soon as she was in, so that Bitha had to run grave risks of being bitten in order to rescue the too intrepid Patsy from the dangers into which she plunged headlong.

Now, in the fog-bound streets, Patsy seemed nervous. After the first joyous setting off she became timid, and trotted along behind Bitha, her nose pressed against her mistress's heels. In the bye-streets the fog was indeed blind and baffling. Bitha had time for a misgiving as to

her wisdom in leaving the house before the flare through the fog, and the voices of the costers shouting their wares, and the rumble of street-traffic going at a walking pace, told her that she had arrived at a busy street of shops.

Seager Street? No; it was Seager Street which she had set out to find. This street was unfamiliar.

Its many lights were sufficient to illumine the darkness of the fog, which was as impenetrable as ever beyond the lit barrows and shop-fronts.

She went along the unfamiliar street, Patsy still nosing at her heels. Her arms were full of parcels, else she would have carried the dog. She divined some trepidation in Patsy's heart from the little nose pressed so closely against her heels as she walked.

She came to a post-office, the very place she was in search of.

Walker Street Post Office. The inscription on the window did not enlighten her. She was not aware of Walker Street. She must have passed the opening to Seager Street in the fog; and she had been thinking that she could find her way there blindfold. She had thought the way very long, but had ascribed it to the absence of the familiar landmarks.

She went into the post-office, and after a considerable wait, she got off her letters and

parcels—the last batch of them. There were so many friends, gentle and simple, about Castle O'Grady to be remembered at Christmas.

When she had finished she glanced up at the clock. It was four o'clock, and outside, even beyond the radius of the fog, the night had fallen.

She picked up Patsy in her arms and went out. The lights in the street were blurred by the fog, and the sounds deadened. The raucous voices of the hawkers came as through a swathing of cotton wool.

Some way down the street she met a policeman and asked her way. He answered with the terseness of the Londoner:

"First to the right, second to the left; third turning on the right and straight through till you come to Seager Street."

"Oh, thank you," said Bitha, "I know Seager Street. I think I can find my way from

there."

The instructions were jumbled in her mind, which seemed to be dulled by the fog. "First to the left, second to the right, third turning on the right and straight through." Was that it? She could not be sure. Had he said, "First to the right, second to the left?"

She had walked for some distance trying to keep the instructions in her mind, wondering if

she could find the turnings, when, suddenly, she found she had forgotten altogether. The blind and baffling fog was bemuddling her brain. She had left the lit thoroughfares behind and turned as she thought towards Seager Street. She kept on for a while walking through something palpable which seemed to clog her as she went. It was very cold: there was frost with the fog. Patsy, who had the Irish terrier short coat, shivered in her arms, and she stopped to put her inside her coat. She could not have told if there were houses either side of her, although she felt that there must be. Not a light showed. The houses might be lit, but there was no sign of it. She moved a little one way, and she felt railings with her outstretched hand,-railings, andan open area gate. She had just escaped it. The flight of stone steps which she could not see, down which she might have stumbled, startled her. She backed from it quickly and her feet felt a kerb. She was still on the path at all events.

She went on a little further and, suddenly, something shambled by her at the trot. A queer repulsive smell came to her through the fog. She stood still, her heart beating hard in her ears. She could not have told whether the thing was man or beast. Perhaps it was a mixture of both. Suddenly the fog was

crowded for her with dangers and terrors. Oh, for a glimpse of the night-sky and the stars, for a friendly human sound other than the long loping run of the thing in the darkness!

Oddly enough, what kept her from sheer and complete terror was the feel of Patsy in her arms-warm now inside her shabby old fur coat, which was very warm, if it was shabby. She had a thought that Patsy might know the way they had come, if she only dared to put her down, but she did not dare. If but she had had a lead!

She had been saying to herself that she would surely meet someone who could tell her if she was on the right way home. But for a long time now she had met nobody excepting only the creature who had shambled by in the dark. She seemed just to be feeling with her feet the way she went. All other senses were at fault in this strange unnatural night.

She went on after the pause, for quite a long way, and there was still no sign of Seager Street. How she longed for its cheerful crowded slumlife. Seager Street would be going on as usual, the women with babies in their arms purchasing the Christmas provisions. Once in Seager Street she would not be lost. There would be plenty of the Melisande Road dwellers there. She would attach herself to some friendly women going her way and reach home accompanied. How desirable it seemed, the warm, lamp-lit little house, with Chris's smiling face to welcome her!

A misgiving came to her. She ought to have reached Seager Street by this time. She had been walking for quite a considerable time. Once or twice Patsy, as far as she could judge, had growled at someone passing by through the fog. She had not had the courage to intercept them.

A breath of wind came into her face and the fog lifted a little. It broke up and wavered in the air like a ragged curtain of impalpable grey stuff. There was an arc light over her head. She caught a momentary glimpse of low fences and piles of bricks and mortar. Her feet were stumbling on a half-made path. She thought she saw a half-built house, the door and window-spaces gaping, but she could not be sure before the fog fell again.

"Where have I got to?" She asked herself the question in terror. She must have wandered considerably from the road she would have taken. She could remember no half-built houses such as these in her walks abroad.

A terror of the waste land and the half-built houses took possession of her. Something moved quite close at hand. A heavy body got

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up and shook itself. Patsy growled. She felt the little spine rise under her hand. She ran, blindfold and stumbling, her feet feeling for the pavement, her heart breathing voiceless prayers for protection.

CHAPTER XIII

BITHA'S FRIEND

SUDDENLY, when she was all but exhausted, she perceived, or thought she perceived, something brightening through the fog. At first she could not be sure. It was perhaps only a lofty arc lamp which she was nearing: the fog would swallow her up again as soon as she had passed it.

She did not dare to stop, for she thought she was being pursued. She could not have told if the heavy thudding noise was her own frightened heart beating against her ears, or the footsteps of a pursuer. Patsy in her arms was a tense thing. She could feel the little muscles rise. Patsy scented danger and was ready to defend her; little Patsy, that tiny ragged bundle of devotion and spirit! She was sure of Patsy's courage if need be.

She stopped: she was done. Even the light brightening in front of her could not keep her going. She must breathe: she was stifling.

She set Patsy down for a second; even Patsy's weight was an additional burden. Then, to her horror, Patsy, like the arrow from the bow, disappeared into the fog.

"Patsy! Patsy!" she cried piteously. There was a shriek from Patsy-a brutal oath: and something lumbered upon her like a mountain out of the fog. She saw a pair of giant hands extended to grasp her. She screamed. There was a thudding noise close to her. The lights! Oh, God had not forgotten her! The thudding suddenly stopped. Someone was beside her, asking what was the matter. Some other soft voices were calling out of the fog. She recognized the lights now as the head-lights of a motor. Something was fumbling about her feet,-Patsy come back and whimpering. The creature who had followed her had disappeared. She thought she heard heavy hob-nailed boots running on, but she could not be sure.

"Someone has frightened you," said a kind, well-bred masculine voice. "I am so glad we came just in time. I will take care of you. I have already picked up some ladies who were lost in the fog. We can only crawl till the fog lifts, but I think we are going right by my compass."

Bitha suddenly burst into tears. The relief

was so enormous.

"Get into the car," the deliverer said. "Be comforted: you are all right now."

The powerful head-lights illumined even the fog. Bitha picked up Patsy, a forlorn little bundle covered with mud, and in a mood between bristling and shivering.

"She must have attacked that awful creature," she said, "and the brute must have kicked her."

"I wish I had dared to follow him," the new friend said. "Let us pray that he may run into the arms of a policeman. It was a lucky thing that coming up from Hounslow I thought I could rush through the fog. So often the fog is merely local, but this is one of the worst I have ever known. We shall come out somewhere presently. I am trying to find the Hammersmith Road for these ladies."

The ladies were two nuns. They received Bitha into the warm interior of the car with a rustling of starched garments as though a colony of doves preened their feathers. They were all exclamations of pity and concern. They, too, had been lost in the terrible fog, which had come down on them with a suddenness while they quested for their orphans somewhere about Putney. They had been rescued by the kind gentleman who was, the nuns were sure, a special messenger sent from Heaven

for their aid. They were French, and they spoke a mixture of French and English. They comforted Bitha, and when they found she must weep they talked quietly to each other till her tears suddenly ended.

She could see the white cornettes of the nuns glimmering in the half-light that surrounded the car. One had taken Patsy on her knee and was stroking her with half-articulate ejaculations of pity and tenderness. Patsy was enjoying the being made much of; she could be affable on occasion although her friendships were few.

Bitha smiled as she listened to the nuns, although her eyes were still wet and she felt rather exhausted. The car was creeping through the fog. She could see the broad back and square shoulders of their friend through the glass in front, and the smaller figure beside him, the chauffeur, she presumed. Their friendthat was what she called him in her mindwas driving. He was outlined darkly against the glare of the head-lights. There was something about him that inspired confidence. Nothing would happen: Bitha was sure of that; she would not have been nearly so sure if it was the chauffeur who drove.

It was a snail's pace; but what did that matter to Bitha, delivered from the terror she had undergone. The nuns were asking her if she was cold. She realized suddenly that the fog had been very cold. She had not thought of it because of the terror. But now, in the luxurious interior of the motor it was comfort, it was warmth, it was life.

The nuns let her alone, murmuring to each other. Bitha caught a word here and there. The Reverend Mother would be frightened for them. She was old and had a weak heart, but soon she would know that they were safe, since God had sent His angel to take care of them.

Bitha smiled in the obscurity of her warm corner. The deliverer was very human; but, of course, Bitha knew very well that God often used His human creatures as angels of kindness and protection to represent Him to His children. So her smile was tender for the little nuns who were so sure that the big, brave protector was an angel.

At last they made the Hammersmith Road, and there the fog seemed less dense, though the motor still crawled, but it was in a procession of traffic, all crawling, and the horse traffic led by men who carried lanterns. They had been helped on their way during the latter part of the journey by boys carrying torches, who volunteered information as to where they were. The boys were conducting parties of lost pedestrians.

As one of them danced up to the car and the head-lights streamed on his peaked London face, as bold and cheerful as a London sparrow, Bitha turned to the nuns.

"Are these not also angels?" she asked demurely.

"It is but a little gamin of the London streets," the nun answered her with a slight air of reproof. "They are helpful, so they please God—but—ce Monsieur là! He indeed is an angel!"

Presently the nuns were at home—with such a chatter and joy at getting home as though they were young birds returning to the nest. All the other nuns seemed to be in the hall to receive them, including the aged Reverend Mother, whom everyone was congratulating and consoling.

Bitha and the deliverer and the chauffeur had all to be comforted with brioches and hot chocolate. Bitha had looked anxiously at her watch, fearful lest Papa should get back and find her missing; but she was reassured. The terrible adventure had taken a much shorter time than she had thought possible: and, as they arrived a puff of wind had come in their faces, and their friend as he helped them out had thanked God that there was the west wind and the fog was going to lift.

"He will take care of thee," said one of the little nuns to Bitha, "and some day we shall learn who he is, though it may not be in this world."

"The chauffeur called him 'your Grace,'" said Bitha, who was in a corner with the young nuns, while the Reverend Mother and the older ones were seated in a circle about the opportune friend.

"Then," said the young nun, "if he was of earth, he would be an Archbishop."

Bitha's laughter pealed so merrily that it made the circle of nuns turn and look at her in wonder and amusement. They too were ready to laugh, and only wanted to know at what they were to laugh. She was thinking that the Archbishop suited the tall man, with the kind grave face and the charming voice, just as little as did the Angel.

"But what of the chauffeur, my sisters?" she asked. "Is he too an Angel or an Archbishop?"

"That we do not ask to know," said one of the nuns, with a pretty air of severity, as though a child should pretend to be severe; but one they called Sister Madelaine, who had a round face and dimples and little eyes of laughter, suddenly laughed, and the dimples came and went, and the face was full of a charming roguery directed upon Bitha.

A moment later someone reported that the fog was lifting, and so they finished their chocolate and said good-bye. The good friend was laughingly refusing his name to the Reverend Mother, yet promising to come again: and Bitha was receiving more kisses on both cheeks than she usually received in a twelvemonth.

Then they were out in the street, where the fog indeed had lifted with a surprising suddenness, and the stars were coming out in the night-sky as though they had never been withdrawn.

Bitha was wrapped warmly in rugs and the gentleman took his place again in the driving seat, while the little chauffeur, who had an air of being highly diverted by the adventure, although keeping the diversion in check, clambered in after him.

In a very few minutes they glided up to the door of Tempe. The good friend had lifted out Patsy carefully, expressing a hope at the same time that she would not be any the worse of her experience. "So the brute kicked her," he said, considering the little grey, ragged bundle that was Patsy. He added: "I would not be surprised if she nipped him first. I hope she did."

"I am sure she did," said Bitha. "She would always fly at anyone who even pretended to attack me."

Chris had opened the door while they talked and stood peering out with an anxious face while Bitha was saying last words to her friend.

"Papa will be so anxious to have an oppor-

tunity of thanking you," she said.

"I will call one of these days to ask how you have got over your adventure," he answered; but he did not give his name, even though Bitha remarked that the nuns had taken him for an angel.

He laughed about it in a way she liked.

"Ought I to undeceive them?" he asked. "They might like to think there was a miracle. On the other hand..."

"Yes?" said Bitha; but he did not com-

plete the sentence.

"They were standing by their enormous baskets when I picked them up," he went on. "Those baskets were quite enough for me to lift. Bennett and I got them on top between us. It was I who met angelic persons, not they."

He went off, lifting his hat. He had not asked her name. After a while Bitha put away the idea that she had heard him addressed as "Your Grace." "Mr. Grace" perhaps. It seemed too far fetched to think of him as a Duke, almost as far fetched as the nuns taking him for an Archbishop or an Angel.

CHAPTER XIV

COLD COMFORT

COLONEL O'GRADY came home complaining of the fog in his throat, and coughing rather badly. There was no chance to tell him of Bitha's adventure, for which she was not wholly sorry. She felt that it would have terrified him in retrospection as much as it had terrified her in the happening.

The sharp cough and cold turned to pleurisy. After one or two clear days the fog had returned. It was bitterly cold,—freezing weather with never a breath of air to dispel

the black fog.

"Poisonous weather," said the doctor coming in one day. He was not altogether dissatisfied with his patient's condition. The attack had not been a heavy one, but while the fog lasted there was no chance of real improvement, and now January, the worst month of the year, had opened badly, and there were the East winds of the English Spring to come when January and February had run their course.

"If you could get him away!" said the doctor tentatively on a day when the fog had given way to a light haze. "The Riviera now. I have just sent a patient out. They are bathed in sun there. You have come from clean air, so your father feels this the more. Your Irish air is wonderful. Not a mote in it. I suppose it is the surrounding seas that make it like glass or water or clear ice rather than the murky thing we call air. Soft as velvet too."

The Riviera! So far as their own resources went the doctor might almost as well have prescribed Paradise. Life in London, even as they lived it, simply, was incredibly expensive. They were "'atin' money" as Chris said.

"The English Spring is a ticklish thing," the doctor went on. "At your father's age . . ."—he glanced at her before continuing—"these

recoveries are apt to be very slow."

He had meant to say something else. She was sure of it. Perhaps, after all, Paradise might be the alternative to the Riviera. The thought set her heart leaping with fear. Papa was all she had,—all she had!

There were the doctor's fees too. He had been very constant in his attendance, but, up to now he had sent no account; apparently he

was interested in the new patient and his daughter. He was a hard-working, local practitioner, with a long panel list, who had very few opportunities of meeting people like Colonel O'Grady and Bitha. At his first coming he had been hasty and almost irritably anxious to get away. Now his visits were much longer. He would sit with Patsy on his knee, caressing her, while he talked, and when he must go he rose from his chair with a sigh. Bitha had no idea of what a doctor's fees might be. Dr. Bailey had been very kind and attentive, and there was a Mrs. Bailey and several young Baileys. When he came to present his bill it must be paid.

The terror about her father was enough to blot out her repugnance to go a-begging, as she put it to herself. It sent her running to Queen's Gate. Uncle William would be kind. He had been very kind and even delicate, for him, at Christmas, tucking away his money-gift neatly inside a pocket of the very handsome despatch-case he had given her. It was not going to be difficult to ask Uncle William to help, but, if it had been, Bitha, in her present mood, was prepared to walk up to the lion's mouth.

It was very cold when she set out to walk to Queen's Gate, but the exercise soon made her warm, even though it was not the same thing as walking in the country,—so many people seemed to get in her way, and the hard pavement was still uncongenial to feet accustomed to press the soft country earth.

But, as she went her way, she heard a bird sing in the trees of a little square, and it lifted her heart incredibly. She forgot that she must be looking rather shabby in her old fur coat and the little hat to match. Lady Orme had suggested frigidly on the occasion of Bitha's last visit that she should get some new clothes, but had said nothing about the wherewithal.

Bitha had expended something of Uncle William's Christmas gift on a new coat and skirt at the January sales; but the coat and skirt only served for mild days. She must just endure Aunt Alice's cold gaze if it should chance to fall upon her. She hoped devoutly that it might not. Uncle William was often home about luncheon time, though he sometimes returned to the City after the meal.

She might just chance to intercept him. If not she must come back again, having found out when he would be at home. She was all aflame to secure the Riviera for Papa. She had been suffering with him when the drawing of his breath was an agony. Now he was comparatively easy. He could even read the *Times* a little for himself. And the bird had sung its song for her ears and her heart.

Her mood was high up as she stood on the steps of the house at Queen's Gate, having knocked and rung, as the brass plate on the door directed her.

It fell as heavy as lead when Mr. Simmons opened the door, and, on her asking for Sir William, informed her that Sir William was gone abroad "for an 'oliday."

Mr. Simmons had received her with a beaming, almost a paternal, smile. Despite the shabby fur coat Bitha had made her way with the servants at Queen's Gate. The servants' hall was agreed that Bitha and Colonel O'Grady were the real thing—" not like some as I could name," Mr. Simmons had said darkly to the housekeeper, Mrs. Toots.

"'Er Ladyship is at 'ome, Miss," Simmons said encouragingly. "The young ladies is out

to lunch."

Bitha hesitated. While she hesitated Lady Orme came rustling out from the dining-room. She was wearing a stiff shot-silk gown which crackled. No soft frou-frous for Lady Orme.

"Oh, Bitha!" she said, wearing the air of disapproval with which she always received her husband's niece. "Did you come to see your uncle? He has gone away for three weeks."

"Oh, I am sorry," said Bitha blankly. She had worked herself up to such a pitch of

optimism that the fall was great. "I did not know he was going away."

"It was rather sudden. He was not feeling very well. If you have anything to say to him, the Splendide at Cap Martin will find him. But, please, let it be nothing of a worrying nature. And please, don't write unless you must."

She stared hard at Bitha, whose eyes had filled with tears. Bitha's tears made Lady Orme very impatient. She herself had never been one to weep. She had been a cold, self-possessed child and girl as she was a woman. She detested emotional people.

"Come upstairs, Bitha," she said. "I am free till tea-time, when I have some visitors coming. You will wish to leave before then."

Her eyes wandered disparagingly over Bitha. She had a dreadful way of beginning at the feet and travelling upwards, repeating the process as regarded the back of the attire she disapproved. Bitha remembered Aunt Alice's way with the Dowager Duchess that Sunday of her bétise. She was certain that Aunt Alice was aware of the most secret rents in her garments.

She followed Lady Orme meekly upstairs. She had not yet faced the dire prospect of appealing to her. The disappointment had left her hopeless and a bit stunned.

"Sit down," said Lady Orme, when they had

arrived in the drawing-room. "What do you think of the anthracite stove? Your Uncle doesn't like it and refuses to have anything but an open fire-grate in his room. But we must all economize these days. Those Bank smashes affect every class."

Bitha could think of nothing better to say than that anthracite was better than gas.

"I am getting gas-stoves fitted to all the bedrooms, while your Uncle is away. He won't like it, but—you have no idea of our coal-bill. I hope you are not extravagant about coal, Bitha? I used to think your fires at Castle O'Grady shockingly wasteful."

"You see, we had the turf in the bog, and so many trees were blown down every winter, and the winters were so damp," Bitha pleaded.

"No excuse at all for wastefulness," Lady Orme answered. "I'm afraid you've got the habit of spending, Bitha, and nothing to keep it up on. You must not expect too much from your Uncle, you know. He has his own family to think of. I have been wanting to speak to you on that point."

It was a most unpromising beginning. Something rose in Bitha's throat, which she, in vain, attempted to swallow. There was a sudden rush of tears. Oh, why was she such a baby?

The tears came in a steady flow, although Lady Orme's gaze ought to have been enough to freeze them.

"Please dry your eyes, Bitha, and tell me what is the matter," she said at last, and her tones were withering. "It would be absurd if anyone, even a servant, came in to find you howling like this. What is the matter, child? Is your father worse?"

Lady Orme had apparently quite forgotten a message left by Sir William for Bitha. She had indeed taken the liberty of opening the envelope containing her husband's hastily scribbled message with its enclosure of fifty pounds in Bank of England notes, and had laid it aside for consideration. Perhaps, in view of the falling Banks—one never knew who might be involved next—he might thank her for that fifty pounds later on.

Bitha swallowed the lump and dabbed at her eyes with her pocket-handkerchief.

"No, Aunt Alice, he is better," she managed to get out.

"Then why be a cry-baby?" the lady asked acrimoniously. "If you will excuse me, Bitha, I have a good many things to attend to. And—Oh, is that your dog? She is simply covered with mud, little wretch, on the new carpet too! You should have left her outside the door."

Bitha hastened to pick up Patsy.

"You will be less presentable than ever," said Aunt Alice in a despairing tone, "I do hope no one will come in and find you sitting there, looking so shabby, with red eyes, and mud all over you from that wretched little beast."

Bitha stood up, suddenly proud and cold. Lady Orme had not thought of asking her if she had had lunch. She had eaten hardly any breakfast and the walk to Queen's Gate had been a long one. It was now three o'clock.

"Good-bye, Aunt Alice," she said. "I am sorry to have troubled you. I hope Uncle William will be much better for the change."

Perhaps Lady Orme's conscience troubled her.

"Wait, Bitha," she said. "If you want any delicacies for your father I am sure that your Uncle would not wish him to go without, although he has so many calls on his purse. If a five-pound note would be of any use I can spare you that..."

"No, thank you, Aunt Alice. I should want at least fifty pounds to take him to the Riviera,

where the doctor says he ought to go."

"Fifty pounds!" Lady Orme repeated, in a shocked voice. She had quite forgotten that enclosure in her husband's letter to Bitha. "But what a monstrous sum! And your

uncle could not possibly afford it. I suppose you have been deluding yourself with the idea that when that Board—the Crowded Areas Board—is it?"

"The Congested Districts Board."

"Oh, well, the Congested Districts Board—it is much the same thing—when the Congested Districts Board takes over your father's land you will be able to repay the various sums we have expended upon you. I tell you that is only a delusion, Bitha. This country is tired of paying for the wastefulness and extravagance of yours. The Crowded Districts Board, as you call it, has probably suspended operations, finally,—and high time too."

"It is only temporarily, Aunt Alice," said Bitha, as she went out; but she knew that what

she said fell on unbelieving ears.

Indeed, though she spoke bravely she was not at all so brave in her own mind. It was a long time that they had been hoping for the Congested Districts Board to get further funds, and the thing had become out of the range of practical politics to Bitha, if not to her father. Indeed she knew that, despite the poverty, the respite from selling was agreeable to her father—and to her. They hated to sell. Perhaps it was as well that Lady Orme was not aware of that fact.

CHAPTER XV

BETTER THAN RUBIES

On the doorstep as she went out she ran into the arms of her cousin Cynthia, who was leading a very fine young red Irish setter in a leash. The setter was as like to Sheila as two peas, and Bitha's heart went out to him.

"Hullo, Bitha! I'd no idea you were coming to lunch," Cynthia said, in her slangy way. "I've been doing gooseberry to Edward Bosanquet and Rosamund. I can't imagine what she sees in him, nor he in her. We've been lunching with his grandmother, who fell asleep after lunch. They went off together to do some shopping and I've taken Shawn for a walk. What do you think of Shawn? I've spent my last cent on him. He's worth it."

Bitha stooped and patted Shawn, who was displaying a great interest in Patsy. He was indeed a beauty, with his silky, shining red coat, his waving tail and soft, beautifully

feathered ears, his deep eyes of intelligence and affection.

"I didn't come to lunch, Cynthia," said Bitha, "I came after lunch."

Her smile was a little unsteady.

"And mother didn't ask you if you had lunched," said Cynthia, with sudden intuition. "Why I believe you're hungry! You are looking quite pale, child. How angry Dad would be if he knew that you went away from his door hungry. He is uncommonly fond of you, Bith."

While she spoke she was inserting her latchkey in the door, which Bitha had shut before

perceiving her.

"Miss O'Grady has had no lunch, Simmons," she said to the butler. "See what you can do for her. And—here—take Shawn downstairs and don't let him escape up to the drawing-room as he did yesterday. Her ladyship does not like dogs in the house."

"No, Miss; yes, Miss," said Simmons, and smiled upon Cynthia and Bitha. "If you'll go into the dining-room, Miss, I'll let the cook know at once."

In a very few minutes a dainty meal was set before Bitha.

"There, don't talk," Cynthia commanded. "Eat! Then you can tell me what's the

matter. Has Ma been ragging you? Why, I don't believe you've had any breakfast, kid!"

"I am rather hungry," Bitha confessed, and fell to.

"You can feed the little one if you like," said Cynthia. "Ma would faint if she saw a dog being fed at table. Shawn eats with more manners than most human beings."

At this moment Shawn pushed open the door and came in.

"You rascal," said Cynthia, with tender affection. "It is a good thing for both of us that Ma is putting on her best teagown for the Dowager Duchess, who has obligingly forgiven her little faux pas on their first introduction. Eat away, Bitha, and give what you like to Patsy. Shawn and I are going to have some love-talk. Afterwards you can tell me what is the matter—for there's something the matter."

Bitha suddenly choked over her food and the tears which had been forced back before Lady Orme's cold and unsympathetic gaze flowed.

She had had no idea of how sweet Cynthia could be. Instead of saying anything she just lifted Patsy into Bitha's lap and went on stroking Shawn's head and looking down into his loving eyes. Patsy, meanwhile, was wild with concern for Bitha's tears, standing up

against her and licking frantically at her hands and her wet cheeks.

After a minute or two Cynthia walked across to the sideboard and poured out a glass of wine.

"It is Comet or something," she said. "Mr. Bosanquet actually had the generosity to give Papa three bottles. Did you ever notice how the rich give to the rich? It can't be better bestowed than on you, my child."

She held the wineglass to Bitha's lips till the

last drop had been swallowed.

"There now, you will be better, presently," she said in a soothing voice.

Sure enough Bitha was better presently, and was able to tell the sympathetic listener of her

carking care about Papa.

"Oh, I see," said Cynthia, "The doctor frightened you, and the minute you were free of him you ran here, thinking Dad would be here and would help you. So he would, Bith. He is not so soft to all the world as he is to you,—he's not altogether wrong when he calls himself a hard man of business,—but you've got round him, somehow. I don't know how Ma prevailed on him to go away, and to consent, moreover, to letters not being forwarded. It was a doctor's prescription, of course, but Dad never had any use for doctors. And so Ma turned you down?"

Bitha nodded. She could not quite trust herself to speak, though the food and the Comet port had warmed and comforted her.

"I'm not surprised that Dad's so fond of you and Jim," Cynthia went on, with apparent irrelevance. "We must have been horrible disappointments to him, Ros and I. Imagine calling her Rosamund! She's as hard as nails, and I can't show people when I like them. I'm horrid—and—masculine...and...in a general way I abhor sentiment, or pretend I do. What a pair of little beasts we must have been in our nursery and school-room days, Ros and I! Poor Dad!"

"I ought to be going home," said Bitha, getting to her feet. "Papa generally sleeps at this hour, but if he should wake he would wonder what kept me so long and be frightened,

perhaps."

When she had said it she lifted Cynthia's large hard brown hand—Cynthia prided herself on her large hands, which had done so much outdoor work—and impressed a hurried little kiss upon it; whereat Cynthia turned very red, said "Rot!" in a gruff voice, and thrust both her hands in the hip pockets of her well-fitting tweed coat; but, all the same, Bitha knew she was not displeased.

"Wait, kid," she said, "I'm almost sorry I

blew my month's money on Shawn, or I would be if he wasn't such an angel. But I've got something as good as money. It's my affair as well as yours. I like to have an uncle like Colonel O'Grady. I've promised to take someone to see him one day-no, not anyone you've met here. I met him at the Duchess's. He's a young man going out to Darkest Africalions up to your window every night and not a white face within a hundred miles of you. He likes the desert. So should I. He was brought up in the lap of luxury, by an old god-mother who sent him into a crack regiment and treated him as her heir and then fell out with him and left all the money to the hospitals. He doesn't grumble. He has had to chuck the Service, of course, but I don't think he minds. And,-you should hear him and Geoffrey Pendray—they are pals—talk about your father. It's hero-worship if you like. His name is Cecil Egerton."

"Yes," said Bitha. "Papa would like to see those young men who admire him when he is well enough."

Again her eyes were misty and she made as though to go.

"Wait a while, Bith. I haven't said what I wanted to say. I'm a blithering idiot, mumbling along about Cecil Egerton. Just sit

down there and comfort Shawn till I come back. Don't let him howl for your life, or it might bring Ma. If he is ass enough to howl, and she calls from the top of the stairs to remove that dog, just you lie low."

She went to the door, passed through and closed it behind her, but was back again in a few seconds. She held her finger to her lips.

"I almost ran into Ma," she said. "I think she is going to scold me about something, when I give her the chance. It's no use, is it, Bitha? We think so differently, and I can't help it."

She looked so appealingly at Bitha that Bitha was moved to say that she was sure Cynthia could not help it, without knowing what "it" was.

"Now don't be a blighter," said Cynthia, frowning. "You don't know what I'm talking about and I've no time to tell you. I won't leave you here with Shawn, to give me away to Ma. I'm going to do a bunk up the back staircase which Ma never approaches. You'd better come too."

"Oh, I ought to be going," said Bitha, pitifully. Colonel O'Grady usually woke up about half-past four for his tea, and it was getting on to that hour.

"So you are going," said Cynthia, pushing Bitha before her, "a few minutes more or less

won't matter."

From an upper gallery they caught a glimpse of Lady Orme, who was scolding a young footman, just outside the drawing-room door. They could see the top of the young man's head with its neat division. The head was bowed from its height with an air of abasement. Lady Orme had a relentless air. She suggested that the scolding had been going on quite a long time and that there was more to come.

"I wonder what is James's latest misdeed!" said Cynthia, closing the door of her bedroom softly behind them. "I don't think I could bear to scold James. He gets so painfully pink when he has done anything wrong. Now,

let me see, Bitha."

She went to her wardrobe, from which a good many things had passed to Bitha since their first meeting in early November, rummaged in the shelves, and brought back a large flat case which she laid in Bitha's hands.

"These are absolutely my own," she said.

"They were given to me by a great-aunt of Mamma's who had so many trinkets that she did not know what to do with them. She said these were rubies. If they are they have considerable value. I have never thought about it. The setting is hideous. Take them away and make money of them."

"But,"—gasped Bitha.

"Your father's life is worth that—even to me. I never wear jewels: I have no use for them; and, perhaps for that reason, they are always being given to me. Here, take it away. Do what you like with it. It is yours."

Bitha still stared. On the faded satin of the case lay a necklet, earrings and brooch of heavy gold in which the jewels glowed with a deep lustre. It was as though fire burned in their depths.

"Oh, I could not, Cynthia," she said. "They are too beautiful, and I am sure they are valuable."

"They are probably garnets and of very little value except for the gold. Anyhow you must take them. They are mine to give and I give them to you."

She thrust the case inside Bitha's coat.

"Get him off to the Riviera," she said. "Coming from your mild climate you have no idea of what an English winter and spring can be. Come! The car was to pick up Rosamund and Edward at Gunthers at five o'clock. It will be coming round for orders. You shall be taken home first."

It was no use resisting the masterful spirit. A little later Bitha found herself in the warm recesses of the luxurious car, wrapped in a magnificent fur rug, into which Patsy had nestled happily, quite oblivious of the fact that she still had dry mud on her paws and her little body. On Bitha's lap lay the case containing the jewels. After all—if they were to save Papa's precious life, Bitha would have done more than accept what was so freely and eagerly given.

"If they prove to be a dud," Cynthia had said at parting, "I shall find something else. I hope they are pukka rubies and not just garnets. But if they are garnets I shall only

have to find you something better."

So Bitha went off wonderfully comforted. The case which she held might have contained living, sparkling fires, so warm did its contact make her feel in a world which a while ago had been a frozen and an unsmiling world.

After all, the world contained so many people who were good to Bitha—Uncle William and Cynthia and the Duchess and Mary Bosanquet and Vasari and—if she went on counting, the fingers of both hands would not have sufficed for the counting. And,—there was her friend of the fog—tall and fair and splendid. Why,—who had said it was a cold and an unfeeling world. And...and...there was Geoffrey Pendray, whom she liked almost best of all.

CHAPTER XVI

THE GOLDEN BALLS

Arrived at Tempe, which she discovered was fast becoming shabby,—perhaps it was the Spring in the air that craved freshness and sweetness,—she forgot all her scruples about

accepting Cynthia's gift.

Colonel O'Grady was sitting up in his dressing gown, by his bedroom fire. Chris explained that he would get up against the doctor's orders, adding that he was coughing so that a Red Injun couldn't stand it, and there was fluff in the room, and the hardest place for one with a cough to stay was in bed, and indeed the beds her Ladyship had bought were none too comfortable.

At his daughter's persuasion the old soldier went meekly back to bed. It was raining outside, by this time, hard, cold rain that stung the skin where it struck as though it were icicles. Though the fire was bright and the curtains drawn the damp chill seemed to come into the room, and permeate the atmosphere. Back in bed again Hercules O'Grady, lifted on his pillows, coughed and coughed, in the uncomplaining way that went to Bitha's heart. If he had complained she could have borne it better. A sudden sense of the incongruity of her father's name with the lean figure which showed under the bed-clothes, and the thin, flushed face, stabbed her like a sword.

She hastened to put on the bronchitis kettle to give him ease. When she went downstairs for something she needed, Chris was talking to Patsy, as she often did when Bitha was not there to listen to her.

"Indeed, me dog," Chris was saying, as Bitha came into the kitchen; "'tis ourselves that is reduced: an' you that proud that you'd only enther the kitchen when your dinner was late. Inside your skin you're as stuck up as them little dogs you sees in the street wid the supercilious noses that mightn't be called noses at all. 'Tis little ye thought you'd ever live in a house that shakes wid yer foot on the stairs. If it wasn't that it was held up be its neighbours it'd tumble down in a dust-hape some time when you were wipin' your feet on the drawin'-room carpet an' axin' some dog that isn't there to come on."

Bitha waited in the doorway for the conclusion of the speech.

"What's the matter with the house, Chris?"

she asked, coming forward.

"Nothin', Miss," Chris answered, "only that it isn't wearin' its age well. It's a bit wake. It'll be about our ears if we stay long enough in it. Them gimcrackery things oughtn't to be allowed."

"Oh!" said Bitha, staring about her with a new comprehension. Chris was quite right. The gilt was coming off the gingerbread with a vengeance. The chintz paper on the walls had gone yellow and begun to mildew. There was a grey look over the room.

"Pans full o' dust I do be sweepin' up," said Chris solemnly. "I never see such a place for dust. Sure the mortar that's in it is mixed wid road dust. The woman at the vegetable shop was tellin' me that she remembers when this was quarry holes an' rubbish."

Chris ended on a fierce note and a snort of scorn which made Patsy emit a sharp bark.

Suddenly Bitha knew the truth of what Chris had said. She had known all the time that the pretty house was jerry-built, but she had not thought that jerry-building could be so bad. The doors and windows had begun to open and close with difficulty. There was

more dust in the house than the traffic warranted. The putty had fallen away from the window-glass, causing fissures through which the wind struck and howled.

Not much longer would Tempe be charming. Lady Orme's cheap furniture had also begun to show its cheapness. Drawers would not open without an effort that shook the house; the springs of chairs and sofas and beds were gone or going. Even under Bitha's light weight her wooden bed, which had looked so pretty, sagged in the middle.

The good things they had brought from Castle O'Grady looked more than ever aristocratic and strangely lonely, as the shoddy furniture revealed its shoddiness.

She said to herself that in a year's time Tempe would be uninhabitable. The doctor had asked about the drains with significance. He had commented upon the jerry-builder's way of jerry-building and circumventing sanitary regulations, in a way which now seemed to have a sinister meaning.

A sudden thought came to her that perhaps the doctor had meant that the drainage was bad and dangerous for his patient. He was not one to prescribe the Riviera lightly, for a dweller in Melisande Road. Had he meant anything? Bitha was wild with terror as she sped along the streets with the jewel case pressed hard against her breast.

She had taken Chris into her confidence. Chris had looked at the jewels with eyes wide as saucers.

"Aren't they fit for a crown for the Blessed in Heaven, Miss Bitha?" she said, staring. "St. Brigid might wear them though they're not her colour. I wouldn't be partin' wid them, Miss Bitha, if I was you. They'd go lovely wid a green dress or a white wan."

"But I must part with them, Chris," said Bitha. "I must get Papa out of London."

"Ye could pawn them, Miss, and they'd still be your own, leastways, if ye paid th' interest on the ticket."

"Pawn!" Bitha knew nothing about pawning, although she was hazily aware of pawnbrokers and their signs of the three golden balls of Lombardy. But it was an idea. If only the pawnbroker would give her enough money to send Papa away! Perhaps by the time the interest became due something might have happened. She might want the jewels herself if the Board should get the money they asked for to buy up Farrakelly, Farrafore and Farragolden. Who knew what happy thing might come to pass for Bitha and Papa?

Chris had given her all instructions, had even

offered to go herself, only to shake her head over her own folly.

"Sure they'd be axin' too many questions if a poor girl like me was to be found in possession of them beauties," she said. "I'd come wid ye, only we can't both lave the Master."

Bitha tried to remember the instructions as to the methods of pawning. Apparently there was a genteel recess, handy as you went in, where the sensitive could pawn, unseen by the regular habitués. Chris advised paying the interest for three months. Nobody knew what mightn't happen in three months. Bitha assented eagerly. The Board might find the money for Farrakelly, Farrafore and Farragolden; and then, all would be plain sailing. Meanwhile Papa would have three months in the sun. Of course, he would have to go alone, but people would find out what he was and love him and be kind to him. He could take his Reminiscences with him, and get the sun into the book while he was finishing it.

Bitha had left Chris in the midst of a long account of how she came to know the etiquette and system of the pawn-shop. Apparently Chris's father had drunk the poker and tongs and the kitchen dresser and her mother's shawl and the bed from under her and Chris's boots and the clock.

It was with a certain terror that Bitha at last descried the three golden balls, and the low dark entrance to the pawnbroker's. It was not likely anyone she knew would espy her. The crowd that moved in a steady current up and down the street was a working-class crowd, men going home from work, women pushing perambulators, wild children who fluttered in and out of the dark streets. To either side of the lit thoroughfares forms flitted to and fro, rushing through the traffic with a recklessness that had brought Bitha's heart into her mouth many a time.

She was grateful for a flaring picture palace next door to the pawnshop, which plunged that building into comparative darkness. She glanced fearfully at the crowd, all too intent on their business or enjoyment to have leisure for her or for such a commonplace incident as someone entering a pawnshop.

She could hardly see when she went in, but she could hear voices very close to her. Apparently a number of boxes ran down the length of the shop, each intended to contain a customer. She pulled nervously at a brass handle and saw a recess which was quite shut off from the rest of the shop. In front of her was a counter: beyond a row of deep shelves reaching to the ceiling and filled with a miscellaneous collection of things.

There was a little bolt on the door which she slipped to so that no one should surprise her. She was horribly frightened already of the whole transaction. Her heart was beating ridiculously fast. She could hear a thick Semitic voice saying that it was the last penny something was "vort" and that the customer might take it elsewhere for he was "veary" of her.

A second more and the voice was addressing her.

"Vot haf you god, my dear?"

Bitha started and became aware of a hooknosed, yellow-skinned gentleman, from whose fingers coruscations were sparkling in the light. To be called "my dear" by such a person was somewhat startling, but she remembered that he had used the same form of address to the customer the other side of the wooden partition, whose goods he had rejected, so she supposed it meant nothing.

Hastily she drew the case from under her arm and used the formula Chris had prescribed.

"What will you give me on these?"

The man opened the case and stared down at its contents, held them to the light, examined them through a sort of magnifying glass, and said.

"Dis is noding ad all. It is nod brecious.

If you haf dought so, my briddy dear, it vas von big misdake of your life. It is old-fashioned. I vill give you for dem dree pound."

Bitha put her hand on the case and drew it back quickly before the man could stop her. At the same time she shot back the bolt of the door.

"I vill gif you vive pound. Vat? No! Den six, seven pound: id is my lasd."

Bitha shook her head. She said to herself that she had got into the wrong box. The man was not honest. His clutching fingers as she withdrew the case had betrayed his eagerness. She only wanted to get away with the jewels. She had made a mistake in coming to this slum place to sell jewellery which she was sure now was valuable.

"Led me haf id till I test id," said the man, looking as though he would leap over the counter. "If I test id I may find id is brecious a little. Vad do you vand? Den pound. Id will be my lasd offer."

"A hundred," said Bitha. "And I will not sell."

"Von hundred and she vill not sell," said the man, to an invisible audience. "Bud id is robbery. De hundred pound you shall haf, but you vill sell."

His voice was persuasive.

- "I won't sell," said Bitha.
- "You haf stolen dem, my briddy dear," the man said, his voice suddenly changing. "I vill summon the bolice. This is an honesd shop. You vill take the hundred—in nodes—or I vill summon the bolice."
- "I will not!" said Bitha and turned the handle of the door. It did not yield. It was locked on the outside.
- "Von hundred and dwenty—von hundred and dirty, von hundred and vivty—Ach, you are greedy—I vill not give you more. I vill summon the bolice."

Whether he meant to summon the police or not must remain a mystery. He was gone, and Bitha was standing in the little box trapped and terrified. For a long time to come the sight of a flaring gas-jet was to turn her sick with terror. She shook the door frantically.

Suddenly it opened. A lean hungry woman's face was in the aperture.

"Run!" said the woman, "and don't get into a place like this again."

Bitha ran, blindly. It was not easy to run in the crowded street. Someone shouted behind her "Stop thief!" She was almost fainting. Someone held her up. Someone else blew a whistle. She closed her eyes. Her breath sobbed as she drew it. She was aware that she was the centre of a crowd. Someone was trying to tug the case from under her arm, someone who was saying in a half screech that she had come into his shop and "snadched" his jewels. There was a policeman.

Bitha closed her eyes again. The policeman

spoke in broad Hibernian tones.

"Will you stop bawlin' an' let us hear the charge? What has the young lady got to say?"

Someone pushed his way through the crowd before Bitha could answer and spoke authoritatively.

"I know this young lady, constable, and I shall be responsible for her. The charge is preposterous."

Bitha opened her eyes wide and looked up, as though she saw the face of St. Patrick himself.

CHAPTER XVII

GOOD FRIENDS

RECOGNITION leaped to her eyes. She drew a deep breath of relief. She was aware that her enemy was trying to disappear into the crowd, which barred his way of escape. The policeman was giving his instructions.

"Detain that man in the name of the law, till he substantiates his charge against this lady who may wish to proceed be summons agin him to vindicate her character."

Bitha felt rather faint. The pressure of the crowd, which had been pushing her hither and thither in the manner of crowds, had distressed and frightened her. Her champion was giving a card to the policeman, who drew nearer to the flare of a coster's barrow the better to see it.

"I will answer for this young lady," said the tall, distinguished-looking man whom a few days ago the Sisters of Bethlehem had taken for an angel.

The policeman's hand went to his helmet in military fashion.

"Better not detain the man," Bitha's friend said in a low voice. "You understand?"

"I do, me lord. He won't be long out of the law's clutches anyhow; I'm keepin' me eye on him, the ould fox."

Bitha felt herself gently drawn through the crowd, which seemed to melt away before them.

"I'm afraid you've had another very unpleasant experience," said the friend, when he had got Bitha well away from the crowd. "May I ask what had happened?"

"I tried to s-s-sell something, some jewels," said Bitha. For the life of her she could not have used the odious word "pawn." "It was because of a special need I had. I got frightened and wanted to take away the jewels and he had locked me in. Then I escaped—a kind woman opened the door—but he followed me, crying 'Stop thief!' and the crowd gathered and held me up. Then you came."

Her eyes as she lifted them to his face showed in the sudden light of a street lamp.

"Don't look at me like that, child," he said in sharp protest. Then he laughed.

"It has been my good luck to help you twice," he said. "This happens to be my particular bit of slumland. There is a Settlement close

by, St. Anselm's, where I sometimes come when I am tired of the world."

Bitha, on her part, had discovered that her friend was almost middle-aged; not a young gentleman like Geoffrey Pendray or Edward Bosanquet; but, Bitha judged, quite forty years of age, and looking a little weary, but very kind.

"The nuns thought you were an angel," she said. By this time they were not far from Melisande Road. "You have been an angel to me twice," she added almost under her

breath.

He laughed.

"A very poor sort of person," he said, "whose privilege it has been to help them and you. You had better not venture into Slumland again. This Slumland is harmless enough to those who know it, but it seems unlucky for you. Don't go into neighbourhoods you don't know well, especially after nightfall. Will you promise me that?"

"I promise you," she said, with her upward

gaze of an almost startling gratitude.

They were crossing a main road and he held her back with a hand on her arm when she would have crossed rashly.

"You must be very careful," he admonished.

"London traffic is dangerous."

He gave her a few terse instructions as to what to do, what not to do, in the crowded streets.

At the corner of two streets, before they plunged again into the comparative gloom, there was a flower-shop. He went into the shop, bought a bowl of lilies of the valley in flower and had it wrapped up carefully. He was taking it to his Settlement, she supposed. She had only a very hazy idea of what a Settlement might be.

"My father is ill," she told him, when they had arrived at the little gate of Tempe, with the ridiculous woolly lions on the gateposts, "or he would wish to thank you for all your goodness to me."

He put the bowl of flowers into her hand.

"These are for you," he said. "I am very sorry your father is ill. I hope he will soon be better."

"But, how kind!" said Bitha gratefully. "Won't you tell me your name, please, so that I can keep it in my grateful thoughts?"

"We shall meet again soon," he answered, lifting his hat and holding her hand for a warm second in his before he went off with a ringing footstep, which somehow suggested to Bitha the wearing of spurs.

She went in, her mind too full of her adventure

to realize all at once that she had failed to procure the money that was to save Papa.

She was saying to herself that perhaps the nuns were right after all, and that the unknown friend was an angel, but as the door opened a sudden memory of her failure came to her. It had only a short time to daunt her, for through the little house there came the sound of a man's voice,—a heavenly voice, singing. The air was Gounod's "Ave Maria."

"It's the Senior," said Chris, with an elated face. "He kem after ye went out. What at all kep' you, Miss Bitha? The master's sittin' up talkin' to him, wake but happy, like a fly in October. Not that I'd be comparin' the master to a leggy crawlin' thing like a fly."

It was Vasari. He turned his handsome Southern face in radiant greeting to Bitha as she came into the room, and, advancing to meet her lifted her hand and kissed it. The room looked quite pleasant in the firelight, with the green-shaded lamp lit and standing on a little table drawn close to a comfortable chair by the hearth. There was a pile of books and papers on the wide arms of the chair, convenient to one who sat there.

"I am going to get up, Bitha," Colonel O'Grady said eagerly. "I am so much better since our friend came. He has been singing,

drawing a crowd about the house to listen. See what he has brought me-those flowers and the beautiful fruit. I tell him he is an extravagant fellow!"

Bitha had left her bowl of lilies of the valley downstairs. She was not yet prepared to tell her father how she had come by them.

But the room was delicious with the scent of violets and narcissi. The flowers were in all manner of receptacles. A big sheaf of the narcissi stood in the washing jug. In the basin was a basket of violets. A bowl of fruit glowed on the table at the bed-foot. Grapes, peaches, apples,-the room smelt like a garden and an orchard mingled.

"Vasari lifted me up so comfortably, Bitha," Colonel O'Grady went on. "He knows the way of it. He is so gentle and so strong. I am going to get up for a few hours. It is so dull in bed."

"Yes—it is very dull in bed," Vasari agreed. "You will enjoy your tea much better if you sit up for it. Afterwards we shall tell Miss Bitha what charming plans we have."

Bitha came back after a short absence during which she had got into a pretty tea-frock which had once been Cynthia's. She put it on now for the first time in honour of the great singer. Chris followed her into the room with a beaming face, carrying a well-laden tea-tray. Colonel

O'Grady was up and seated in the chair by the fire and Vasari close to him. Patsy jumped into a chair facing her master's, and with her nose on her paws watched him with bright alert eyes under her shaggy thatch. Patsy was an excellent dog for the sick room, since she was prepared to lie all day, almost motionless, watching the beloved object as though she feared to lose it if she closed her eyes.

Colonel O'Grady had made quite a careful toilette. Except that he wore a dressing-gown, for which he apologized, he was spotlessly clean and spruce as was his habit. There was an almost starched cleanness about him. Now, except that he dropped a little in his chair, he who had been stiff and upright, and that his cheeks were paler than usual, he looked like himself—till he coughed. When he coughed Vasari's eyes upon him were kind and grave.

After one of the coughing-fits was over, while the sick man lay back with eyes closed, looking rather exhausted, Vasari unfolded the great news to Bitha. He was going to take his friend to the Riviera and later to Italy. He himself needed a good holiday. He had turned his back on all the concert and operatic agents, leaving them in despair.

"I go to be with the little mother," he said.
"For a while I shall be just Luigi Vasari

to the neighbours in the village among the vineyards; Luigi Vasari, the good-for-nothing who would not work like the others at the vintage or the olive gathering, but would go singing over the hillsides till the good people washed their hands of such a wastrel. I promise myself four months of holiday. We shall roam from place to place at our will-and this so beloved father will cease to cough."

"Oh!" said Bitha, breathlessly. "Are you really going to take him away, Signor Vasari? Away from this choking, blinding, black London! Oh, surely it was God sent you to our door that night just before Christmas!"

"When you had the charity of God for the povero who sang in the streets! But,-how simple you were, my friends! You made me, a street singer, free of your house and hospitality. Supposing I had been a rascal!"

"Not with that voice," said Hercules O'Grady, simply. "And without the voice one has but to look at you, Vasari. But-Bitha,he will not hear of my paying even a little. This holiday is to be his free gift to me."

"But I have quantities of money," said Vasari, flinging out his hands as though over piles of gold. "I do not know what to do with the money my voice brings me. It is as though the voice rained gold-golden showers. I have little use for it, me. Grazia and her little one left me the year after we were married. I have no one except the little mother, and for her money can do all but nothing."

So it had come about. It had been given straight from the kind Father in Heaven. Bitha never doubted that all the anxiety, the agony she had endured was for nothing: her puny efforts had been for nothing. God had had them in His mind and beneficence all the time.

After Chris had taken away the tea-tray they sat and talked happily of the holiday that was to make Hercules O'Grady sound again. There were to be no delays. To-morrow the arrangements would be complete. Travelling would be easy, since Vasari was taking his own car. There was but to wrap up the patient carefully. Already Vasari had seen the doctor and the doctor gave permission. Vasari would see to it that there were plenty of rugs and coats. The car would be warmed. There was but to run down to Dover, ship the car—then the short passage to Calais, and the car again, flying away and away to the South and the sun.

Hercules O'Grady's face caught the glow from Vasari's. The weariness and the pinched look had passed away from it. They talked while Bitha listened. Her father had it in his mind that she should stay at Queen's Gate during the term of his absence. Lady Orme would doubtless know someone who would keep Chris company. Or,-Chris could go home for a holiday and Tempe could be shut up.

Bitha had a passing thought that Tempe would hardly survive even a brief period of being shut up. It would crumble away to a dust-heap if they were to be out of it for three months. Already the mildew was on papers and shoes and all things susceptible of mildew. The mirrors in the little house were befogged. The wood-surfaces which ought to have been bright were dull. Silver and glass kept Chris perpetually busy lest they blackened: the books in the bookcases began to smell mouldy.

"He must not come back to Tempe," Bitha said to herself.

How that was going to be avoided was a question she laid aside for consideration when it must be considered. Perhaps Papa's Reminiscences were going to turn up trumps. He would finish the book in the sun. Or the long deferred payment for Farrakelly, Farrafore and Farragolden might be made. But that was a hope so long cheated that now it presented no face of probability even to that optimist, Bitha. And yet,—one never knew. God was in His Heaven and careful of the world.

CHAPTER XVIII

BITHA ALONE

BITHA had not accepted her father's suggestion that she should spend the period of his absence at Queen's Gate. It had never entered into his simple head that she might not be welcome. He knew Alice Orme for a woman who could be cold and disagreeable, but she had made herself pleasant to him of late and he had forgotten and forgiven. It had not occurred to him that she was the kind of woman who would always rebuff a poor and charming girl—any girl, indeed, almost any woman—unless there was some worldly reason for being civil.

Bitha talked about her work. She liked that phrase, her work She had several engagements ahead of her to decorate houses and supper-tables. Besides the friends who took an interest in her, the florists, from whom she ordered her flowers, had begun to take an interest too and to recommend her to their

patrons. Her connection was growing. It was a good thing to have so much to do now that she was left alone. The days and the weeks were mounting up since Vasari's long white motor-car had glided away from the door of Tempe, with Papa, wrapped in a fur coat and smothered in rugs, craning his neck to the last to get a look at Bitha, where she stood, waving a handkerchief to him, till the car was out of sight.

She felt very lonely for her father when she could think of it, and she was glad the work was increasing. Good reports came back from him. The days were warm and sunny at Mentone. He was surrounded by luxuries. was motoring, driving, sailing, presently walking and riding. The cough was lesseningwas a thing of the past. He was back at work on the "Reminiscences" and enjoying it. Bitha knew that enjoyment meant good work. He had a delightful room with a sunny oriel and a wonderful view of the mountains. He lived on the fat of the land. Vasari was a prodigal fellow, a prince. By and bye, when the Congested Districts Board began to pay again and they were back at Castle O'Grady, they must have Vasari. He would adore the people and they him.

Colonel O'Grady's only regret was that his

little girl must be in the fogs and smoke of London while he enjoyed the blue air and the sunshine and the beauty. He was glad that Bitha was so busy and happy, and that Chris was taking care of her. He commended Chris and sent a pat of the head for Patsy, who wagged her tail when the message was read to her.

Except for work Bitha's days were not very eventful. She saw little of the Ormes. Sir William was still away. His absence was now talked about as a rest-cure. Apparently the responsibility of his great business, which he would delegate to no one, had broken him down, temporarily. Cynthia had joined him a few days after Bitha had seen her, very suddenly, it seemed. Her father had asked for her society and she had gone.

There was no friendly presence to draw Bitha to Queen's Gate. Rosamund was engaged formally now to Edward Bosanquet. Jim, of course, was back at school. What should bring Bitha to Queen's Gate? where no one wanted her and none was kind except the servants.

She was rather poor in these days, when she missed Uncle William's occasional gifts of money, so that it was all the more important that her work grew. There were times when the money ran very low in her purse, when she would take out Cynthia's jewels from their safe

hiding place and look at them wistfully. She had meant to take back the jewels to Cynthia, because the greed of the pawnbroker had persuaded her that they were of much greater intrinsic value than Cynthia could have supposed. Sometimes she thought of having them valued -at one of the big shops in Regent Street or Bond Street, but the episode with the pawnbroker had given her a shock. Supposing the people in the glittering West End shops should suspect her of stealing the jewels and have her detained while they sent for a policeman. She had heard of such things. There might not be another opportune angel to come to her rescue.

Mary Bosanquet had called one day when Bitha was at home, bringing Geoffrey Pendray in her train.

He carried a beautiful basket of violets for Bitha, and had sat, his hat on his knees, looking about the little drawing-room with an air of grave, bright interest, while Mary Bosanquet told the news. She talked of her brother's engagement to Rosamund Orme, discussing it with great frankness.

"Of course Edward has a temper," she said, -"oh, a dreadful temper while it lasts! although he is ready to laugh at himself immediately afterwards. I do hope he and Rosamund will get on. I wish it were Cynthia, really, but poor Cynthia has been getting engaged to that nice detrimental Cecil Egerton, and so her mother has packed her off to be with her father till the young man is out of the way. Of course Sir William was supposed to have sent for Cynthia, who is devoted to him, but anyone at all could have seen Lady Orme's hand in it."

"Oh!" said Bitha, and had a thought that if Cynthia insisted on marrying her detrimental, and her parents were to quarrel with her, the jewels which were hers indubitably might be a very precious asset.

She came back to the knowledge that Mary Bosanquet was saying, with soft pants between the words:

"Do you suppose that Rosamund takes after Lady Orme? Oh, I hope not, for Edward is so very dear to me."

There came a time,—it was cold March weather, with a biting North-Easter,—when most of Bitha's friends seemed to be away. There had been an epidemic of influenza in January, when the Dowager Duchess, who had been so kind to Bitha, had been very ill—too ill for the ball which Bitha was to have decorated, to take place. She had gone to Algiers to escape the North-East winds. Mrs. Pendray Bitha

occasionally saw at the parties where she sometimes danced after her work was done. Mrs. Pendray's friendliness had come to nothing. She had actually surveyed Bitha one day through her lorgnette with an air of not recognizing her. It might have been Lady Orme. Bitha felt the slight the more that the lady reddened and looked unhappy over the snub. Everyone said that Mrs. Pendray was so very good-natured. It could not have been agreeable to her to snub poor Bitha.

Bitha never associated it with Geoffrey Pendray's interest in her. He was so kind, sending her flowers and concert tickets, and now and again a new book. Once, as she came home through a dark street, a step behind her made her turn round apprehensively, only to find that it was Geoffrey Pendray.

Often since then she had thought she caught sight of him; but that, of course, was a delusion. He did not come to Tempe, although his gifts came, but now and again she danced with him and talked with him in the houses where they met.

The young Duchess's ball, postponed because of the Dowager's illness, came off towards the end of March. Bitha's decorations were greatly admired. Nothing could well be simpler than the white lilies and creamy-pink gladioli,

standing in rows in tall Chinese vases down the long drawing-rooms, which were painted like a Roman villa with blue skies and a winding river, vineyards and a little town set on a hillside. It required so little decoration, said Bitha, setting her lilies singly in the beautiful vases.

The Duchess was always delightful to Bitha, treating her as though she was a friend who had undertaken some troublesome task for love of her. Bitha rather missed the children, who were still away. She had the most charming recollections of the afternoon they spent together on the nursery floor.

"You see I never do anything but amuse myself," said the Duchess. "I am just a butterfly, with a husband who loves his books and pictures and is wise and high-minded, and might do great things if only he had not so foolish a wife."

Bitha would not have taken the speech seriously but somehow, as the Duchess concluded, there was a falling note in her voice, as though she might have been sad instead of gay: she had ended with a soft peal of laughter.

"You know my husband, do you not?" she went on.

[&]quot; No."

[&]quot;No! I had an idea you had met. Oh,

of course, he was away when my mother-in-law brought you to see me. Well, Miss O'Grady, please be very much at home, and do exactly what you like. Order what you like for the rooms. I think the idea of the hidden fountains is charming. It will keep the dancers cool. And with the night-blue skies and the pergolas of roses on wall and ceilings and your decorations, the Italian illusion will be perfect."

It was a delight to work for the young Duchess. She was so immensely pleased with all Bitha did. She was like a soft beautiful pink rose herself as she went to and fro the stately house, nearly always wearing fine garments. One could not have imagined her in anything that was not beautiful.

Bitha had been two or three days in the house before she saw the Duke. His absence at lunch-time was explained by the fact that the sale of a great library was going on at Sotheby's and the Duke was a bibliophile. Bitha always went home to Tempe for the night: she would not have left Chris and Patsy alone, although Chris urged it, saying that Patsy had more sense and better manners than many a Christian child, and was the grandest of company now she'd given up despising Chris.

It was the afternoon of the day of the ball. The days had taken a long stretch. It was light now till half-past six. The library with its bibliographical treasures and fine statuary and paintings, was to be open to the guests like the rest of the house: only the Duke's private suite was to be exempted.

"The Duke must have his solitude to retire upon," the young Duchess explained. "He doesn't like dancing. I remember when he used to dance with me, but he has given it up. He is very sweet about it though, and never deprives me of my dances, though he won't go with me any more."

The young Duchess's voice trailed into something that had a plaintive sound. Was there a canker in her rose of life? Was it possible? She seemed to have everything in the world that could make a woman happy—and she was always laughing.

"Now you are to go into the library and rest," the Duchess said kindly to Bitha, when there was nothing left for her to do. "If you were really a wise child you would lie down and sleep, so as to be fresh for to-night, but since you will not, you can have the library to yourself. That is a room not to be meddled with. You can read or write or do anything you like. I should advise a snooze before the fire, but I know how dull that sounds to youth."

For once Bitha had been persuaded to stay

the night at Park Lane, while another Irish maid-servant, whom Chris had picked up at the Church, kept her company. Bitha's best frock, a white lace tunic over silver, with a trail of green leaves, lay on the bed in the tiny room upstairs which was hers for the night, and seemed so disproportionate to the great reception rooms.

The little bedroom, pretty as it was, had not allured Bitha. It was stuffy and cold, for it contained no fireplace, and the artificial heating was not to her liking.

She sat down in a deep chair before the fire in the library and rested her head against the cushions. Presently she meant to get up and find a book she wanted and switch on the electric light.

But the presently did not come. The warm quiet of the room, with the pleasant smell of leather-bound volumes, mingled with the scent of flowers, made her drowsy. The fire leaped and sparkled. Outside it was bitterly cold. The drowsy warmth was so pleasant. Suddenly Bitha was asleep.

CHAPTER XIX

A NEW-OLD FRIEND

SHE awoke to a low clear fire and darkness in the room beyond the circle of the firelight. The noise of the traffic came as a subdued hum. She was still dreaming of Castle O'Grady and of how they had gone back there because money had been showered upon them: the mirage had become reality and the Congested Districts Board had paid up for Farrakelly, Farrafore and Farragolden.

"I hope you enjoyed your sleep," said a strangely familiar voice. "Now that I am not afraid of wakening you I had better put a log on the fire."

Bitha stared. Her head was still full of her dreams. She was not sure if the tall man who showed against the firelight was not part of the dream. His face was turned away from her as he stooped to lift the log, but his voice was the voice of a friend who had helped her in very bitter need, not once but twice.

Only, how did he come here? It was surely a delusion, part of a dream, that he should be here?

The flames licked the side of the log and the room was full of a pleasant resinous odour. Bitha's friend turned partly towards her. His face was in profile. It was a handsome profile, but a lean one, almost haggard. Suddenly she felt sorry for her friend, she knew not why.

"How do you come to be here?" she asked, with something of the wonder of her dream in her voice.

"It is my house," said her friend, amazingly. "We were bound to meet sooner or later. That was why I did not insist upon an acquaintance. I knew all about you from my mother."

"You are the Duke! The nuns thought you might be an Archbishop-an Archbishop-Saint, you know, or an Angel.

"Do I look like an angel? Or an Archbishop or a Saint?" he asked with a grave smile.

"I don't know any saints who are not just old peasants, not the least bit in the world like you," said Bitha, sitting up and with a sense of happiness in his presence. "The only Archbishop I know is not the least bit in the world like you either. He is just a simple fatherly old man, very wise and kind."

"It was a good adventure that, with the nuns," he said, and suddenly he sat down where she could see his face. The log was flaming now; little spurts, as of released resin, were hissing from it with a pleasant sound. The man's face was quite bright. Perhaps the haggardness had been a delusion. "I picked them up somewhere Putney way. Luckily the lights of the car got them as they stood fluttering on an island. With their odd, winged head-dresses they had a suggestion as though they had fallen out of the sky. I have often wondered how they reached the island, but there they were, with their huge baskets. How they could have carried them baffles me. It was only sheer terror persuaded them to accept the hospitality of my car. They wanted to walk behind, but the traffic was pressing on us at every side, blundering along in the dark. So finally they accepted."

"By this time you are a legend, a miracle, to the nuns."

"I suppose so."

Again his smile was grave. Perhaps it was the shadows cast by the firelight made his eyes tragic in their hollows and his cheeks so lean. She realized that she had never yet seen his face in a good light.

"I hope you are going to enjoy your dance,"

he said kindly. "I have seen your decorations.

They are charming."

"But I have not seen you," said Bitha, feeling very happy. "Are you sure you are not an apparition—as the nuns thought?" She had a shy audacity which he found very charming.

"I am honest flesh and blood," he said.

"I have only just got back from the sale of the Poingdestre library. What a library to sell! It must have been like parting with his children to old Poingdestre who has none. I can't imagine why he should have sold his library. It could not have been that like old Francis Bacon he said 'Enough of these toyes!' because he was making ready for the other world. Poingdestre has a lively interest in this."

Suddenly his voice changed.

"You are of course by now an old friend of the Duchess's," he said, "what do you think of her?"

Bitha was startled at the strange abrupt question.

"She is very beautiful," she answered.

"Very beautiful and very young," said the Duke, and there was something of sorrow in his voice. "She is very much admired and she is very gay. She goes to many dances. I know she dances beautifully. I tried to learn

to dance so that I might go with her, but I did not make much progress and I soon gave it up. One should learn to dance when one is young. I despised it then."

"But you are young."

"Forty," said the Duke: and suddenly Bitha was aware that his hair was grey about the temples. "I am old as compared with my wife. She likes young society naturally. Now I must not detain you. The dressing-bell has rung. We shall meet again at dinner."

At the dinner-table there were half-a-dozen smart young men whom the Duchess called by their Christian names. They all seemed to revolve around her, directing most of their attention towards her and sparing little for Bitha and the other two girls who were members of the party. Bitha sat on the right of the Duke, who talked alternately to her and the lady, no longer very young but with a certain noble handsomeness, whose name Bitha understood was Edith Lester. The Duke had referred to her as his distant cousin. Sometimes all three were in serious conversation, hindered, from time to time, by the noisiness of the party about the Duchess.

While the Duke talked to Miss Lester Bitha had time to observe. The other girl was very pretty and very young, a soft bundled-up young thing, in a bunchy white frock trimmed with roses. She was very silent, and no wonder, for the young man who sat between her and Miss Lester was talking across her into the circle about the Duchess.

"I do not admire the manners of the present day young men," the Duke said in Bitha's ear.

Perhaps Mr. Roscoe heard, for he made an obvious effort to attend to his partner's wants.

"They are too young for us," said the Duke, smiling at Bitha, a little wistfully.

Bitha enjoyed her ball, without remembering that she was not there as an ordinary guest. Now that she was really "in the business" she had very diverse experiences of how her employers regarded her position. A lady in Grosvenor Square only the week before had asked her if she would like to come and look on at the dancing, adding that in case she was asked to dance she need not accept. "Adolph and August are so good-natured," she said, "they will ask you if they see you sitting; but you will not expect to dance with them. It will be their good-nature."

Bitha had replied that she was engaged for that evening and had departed with her cheque, which the lady had cut down very considerably from Bitha's usual fee because the flower-bill had been so large. Another lady who had once been a Lady Mayoress of London, who carried more jewels upon her ample person than anyone Bitha had ever seen, had offered her a seat in the gallery and light refreshments with the servants.

These things did not wound Bitha, but they very much enraged Geoffrey Pendray, with whom Bitha danced and sat out several dances, when she told him the stories humorously.

Sometimes, too, she did not satisfy her patrons. There was the lady who wanted scarlet and pink geraniums with maiden-hair fern in a quiet white-panelled room, and thought Bitha's Iceland and Shirley poppies dingy. On the other hand she was sometimes called into consultation about the laying out of gardens and the planning of herbaceous borders, and she began to see the most wonderful designs for chintzes, with a prodigality of colours and form as daring as Nature's.

The Duchess's was a very crowded ball; and it was quite well on into the night before Bitha espied her Aunt sitting among the dowagers. Lady Orme, catching sight of her at the same time, beckoned to her somewhat peremptorily and Bitha went and sat down beside her.

"How do you do, Bitha?" the lady asked in very icy tones. "I have not seen you for quite a long time."

"No," said Bitha. "You were out the last time I called, Aunt Alice. I hope Uncle William is better?"

"I begin to believe your uncle is just imagining himself ill," said Lady Orme unexpectedly. "I am thinking of going out and bringing him back. A great business like his cannot long do without its head. Your uncle has been the mainspring of everything."

"I suppose that is why he felt the strain,"

said Bitha.

"He was tired before he went out," Lady Orme acknowledged with an unwilling air, "but he has had plenty of time to rest. Cynthia and he are just enjoying themselves; but every holiday must have an end. And your father when is he coming home?"

"Not before May, I think."

"Oh! It is well for people who can enjoy life like that. Now I should think it wrong to be idle for so long."

"His book is finished and gone to a publisher,"

said Bitha, patiently.

"It will go to a good many publishers before it is accepted," Lady Orme said ruthlessly. "I hope you're not building on that, Bitha. What could your father have to tell that would make people pay their good shillings to read him? He is not like Lord Highbury or Lady Lightacre, whose books go into their thousands. Mudies have not yet been able to send me Lady Lightacre's My Indiscretions; and Lord Highbury's A Social Butterfly for Fifty Years is running into its thousands. I hear he got ten thousand pounds for the serial rights from the Sunday Scream. Can your father hope to compete with that?"

"I'm afraid not," said Bitha.

"If you've been building false hopes on his book, the sooner you abandon them the better. He should come home and get something to do. I don't altogether like a niece of mine going round doing work for my friends—like a parlourmaid. On the other hand you can't expect to live on your uncle, who has a family of his own to support."

Bitha was depressed, as she always was by her Aunt Alice. She was aware of a young man hovering in the background uneasily,—one of her partners.

"I'm afraid I must go, Aunt Alice," she said sweetly. "There is Captain Tarleton waiting for me. I'm engaged to him for this dance."

Lady Orme put up her lorgnette to gaze at Captain Tarleton in the distance. She was really short-sighted, and if she had not been an ambitious woman she would have worn spectacles. "I wonder if you should dance, Bitha!" she said. "Of course I know some people are easy-going about these things: and the Duchess is very good-natured. She is quite capable of asking the young women from the shops to her dances. Still, it might be more becoming to abstain from dancing. I think I saw you dancing more than once with Captain Pendray. I don't think Mrs. Pendray would approve."

She had turned the lorgnette upon Bitha. Suddenly her face changed: her voice thickened.

"Is that Cynthia's necklace you are wearing?" she asked. "How do you come to have it? She did not give it to you!"

"Only lent," said Bitha. Captain Tarleton had arrived on the scene and was standing by patiently. "I shall come round to-morrow, and tell you about it. You will be in about three o'clock?"

Lady Orme nodded her head. Apparently she was too angry to speak.

CHAPTER XX

BITHA IS ANGRY

RATHER to her relief, when she came back to the ball-room from the marquee, where she had had an ice—her seventh that evening, she told Captain Tarleton—Bitha found that her aunt had disappeared. Rosamund, still with Edward Bosanquet, replied to Bitha's question that Mamma had had one of her sudden headaches and had gone home. The motor would be sent back for her.

"How are you getting home to your wilds?" she asked; but Bitha knew Rosamund too well to suppose that she intended to offer her a lift.

"I have my car," said Edward Bosanquet, and could run you down to Fulham."

Bitha beamed on him: and Rosamund looked rather sulky. She had begun to grumble that that was hardly necessary, when Bitha settled the matter by saying that she was staying for the night.

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"Oh!" said Rosamund in frank amazement. "Did the Duchess ask you?"

"I could hardly have stayed without," Bitha replied, and went on her way, feeling absurdly grateful to Edward Bosanquet for offering to drive her home. She had refrained from saying, as she might have done, that she had only to ask for a car if she needed one. Edward Bosanquet had shown little sign hitherto of being aware of her existence, but Bitha was easily grateful. She said to herself that being Mary Bosanquet's brother, and his mother's son, he must be good at heart.

She was ill at ease all the same. She realized that it must have been the discovery of Cynthia's necklace in her possession that had caused her aunt's sudden headache. A very outspoken doctor, too big a man to care if he lost a disagreeable patient, had diagnosed Lady Orme's headaches as "temper headaches," and had bidden her control her temper.

Bitha said to herself that she must face the music to-morrow. Perhaps she had better take the precaution of lunching where she was before going on to Queen's Gate. She could telephone to Chris in the morning. The telephone was one of the modern conveniences which the builder of Tempe and all the other crazy little houses had put into his erections.

It did not occur to simple Bitha that Aunt Alice might be impressed if she knew on what very easy terms her husband's niece had come to be with the young Duchess, who could be very exclusive when it pleased her. That lovely person had suggested to Bitha earlier in the evening that she should stay in bed next day till lunch-time and lunch before going back to Fulham.

Resolutely Bitha put Aunt Alice out of her mind. She was not going to have her dance spoilt. It had been so good up to this. She said to herself recklessly that she was glad she had the necklace. It became her, as Cynthia had said, far better than it had become its owner. How the soft fires burnt and sparkled on her neck, making it look white, thought Bitha, in simple ignorance of one of her beauties. Bitha still remembered that she had been "Cock-nosed Biddy Casey" to the Irish servants long ago, and was humble about her looks and her red head.

She was sitting in a secluded corner of the conservatory behind a clump of palm trees with Geoffrey Pendray. He had admired the necklace, and she found herself telling him the story of her adventure at the pawnbroker's, and how the Duke had come to her assistance for the second time. It seemed easy to say all or

nearly all that was in her mind, to this kind, friendly, sympathetic young man.

"Some people have all the luck," he said, when she had finished. "I envy the Duke. Why was not I there?"

Then he answered his own question.

"Of course he is a bit of a saint, if not exactly an angel. He has it from his mother. Very few people in his world know that he belongs to a sort of brotherhood who work in the London slums. I suppose his district is your way. They go from door to door and give help where it is needed, without bothering people. And nobody knows who they are. They are nameless."

"Then the nuns were not so far wrong,"

said Bitha. "I knew he looked good."

"Yes,"—Geoffrey Pendray paused before going on—" perhaps he is too good. Everyone knows his lovely wife and he are drifting apart, have drifted apart. A thousand pities: and it was a love-match. She had a gay time before her marriage: and his tastes are all serious. It is perhaps inevitable that she should be a butterfly."

Bitha's heart was very sad, as she thought over his words, for the Duke and Duchess, to each of whom she had given a warm impulsive affection. It troubled her through her sleep, and next day as she walked to Queen's Gate she thought about the sorrow of their drifting apart even through her apprehension of a scene with Aunt Alice. Bitha had been brought up in such an atmosphere of love and tenderness that the thought of anger, especially directed upon herself, was dreadful to her.

She found Lady Orme seated by the drawing-room fire. Outside, it was dry and cold, East Wind, but the birds were all in song now, and the bulbs were out in the park. The florists' windows were gay and the baskets of the flower-girls by the pavements were heaped to over-flowing. Lady Orme was huddled in a sable cape, and though she was seated by a glowing fire she had a gorgeous down quilt spread over her knees.

"Horrible weather," she said as Bitha came in; but she made no suggestion that Bitha should sit. A sudden spirit, however, leaped in Bitha. She had done nothing wrong, and though she loathed a scene she was not going to be quelled by what Cynthia had called "Ma's bleak eye."

Without a word she offered the case containing Cynthia's jewels, which Lady Orme snatched as though she feared it might be withdrawn. She opened the case and looked within as though to make sure the jewels were

there: closed it again, and laid it to one side. Bitha meanwhile had sat down without being asked.

"How did you come by the things?" asked Lady Orme, with a flash of coming storm in her eyes and a mutter of it in her voice.

"Cynthia gave them to me."

"Gave! You said lent. People don't give such valuable things,—even Cynthia, who is a fool and an obstinate one. You must have wheedled them out of her."

"She gave them to me,—for a purpose," Bitha said, meeting Lady Orme's eyes steadily. "After all, I did not need them for the purpose for which I accepted the gift."

"May I ask the purpose?"

Lady Orme's voice was icy. Again Bitha's spirit leaped up.

"To save my father's life," she said, and met

Lady Orme's eyes defiantly.

"Oh! And that Italian person intervened. It is very nice for your father to have someone to frank him to Italy—I'm glad since it saved my daughter's jewels. By the way, one of those women told me last night a ridiculous story which she said came from the Duchess, about some girl the Duke had intervened to save when she was accused of trying to pawn stolen jewels. I have been putting two and

two together since I saw you wearing Cynthia's necklace. Was that girl by any chance you?"

"It was me," said Bitha.

"Then I call it a most disgraceful thing!" said Lady Orme flaming. "It was quite disagreeable enough to have you employed by our friends without such a happening as this. It is enough to injure my daughters' prospects. The Bosanquets are very particular. I suppose if the Duke had not intervened you might have figured in the police courts."

"Very probably," said Bitha.

"You sit there and you dare to say 'very probably' to me!" cried Lady Orme, furiously. "Do you realize that it might have seriously affected Rosamund's engagement?"

"But I hadn't stolen the jewels," said Bitha,

getting up.

"That remains to be proved," said Lady Orme, her temper sweeping all before it. "You had better go back to your own country, where people, perhaps, are not so particular. Your uncle shall hear the whole story. He will learn on what undeserving people his charity has been spent."

Again her blinding headache swept over her and she could not see, but she heard the closing of the door. Bitha was gone.

Bitha, letting herself out, met Rosamund

and Edward Bosanquet entering, Rosamund in a fur coat, a toque of feathers on her fair hair, violets in her muff and tucked away into her coat, looking her best. Her colour was less hard than usual and her eyes softer. Bitha wondered in her new angry mood why Rosamund should look like that because of Edward Bosanquet, the small, cold, neat man, with his fur-lined coat up to his ears because the March wind blew. She wondered equally why Edward Bosanquet should look so well-pleased with his world because of Rosamund.

She had to remind herself that last night she had discovered something of a liking for Mary Bosanquet's brother. Bitha, for the moment, was very much out of tune with her world.

She was bitterly angry. In the heat of the moment, when her very heart seemed rasped, she had said to herself that she hoped Aunt Alice would be punished: she hoped it. She would not lift a finger to save her if she could.

She went home with a bleak face and eyes hard and bright. It was a day when many people had an East Wind face. The skies were grey and hard. Dust formed in little pools and eddies on the paths, and were lifted by the wind to be blown in the faces of the way-farers. Advertisement posters torn down from the hoardings by the wind and reduced to

fragments—straws,—all manner of flotsam and jetsam was blown untidily about the streets. Bitha tasted dust. It was hardly any comfort to her that the dust was sometimes pink where the almond bloom had fallen from its starry state.

Chris exclaimed when Bitha appeared: "You're frozen, Miss," she said.

"Yes, Chris,—I'm frozen—inside and out," said Bitha, and sat down in Papa's chair and leaned her cheek against it as though it had some feel of him to comfort her.

Going in a little later with tea Chris found "the young mistress" in tears. Patsy was standing by Bitha, her nose resting on her knees, her eyes full of a most mournful anxiety.

"'Tis the lonesomeness," said Chris in her own mind, and reminded herself that if it wasn't for Miss Bitha and the master she never could bear this strange wilderness of streets, with the "quare talk" of the people, and they always running about so busily, and "the age of them to be workin'!"

Why Chris had seen messenger-boys "no bigger thin a wran" carrying baskets with a business-like air. "Sure 'tis no wonder Ireland gets left behind," said Chris. "The like of them would be playin' or trottin' at their mammie's heels in poor Ireland."

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She poured out a cup of tea and left it at Bitha's elbow, then went out quickly and closed the door, while Bitha wept away all the hardness and anger and emerged, exhausted indeed but herself once more, with no mind to leave anyone unforgiven,—even Aunt Alice.

CHAPTER XXI

BUSINESS TROUBLES

As the spring went on life seemed to grow duller for Bitha. She had now as much work as she could accomplish, and was quite a success in a modest way. Her friend, Mr. Vance, the florist, was always urging her to charge higher fees. He pronounced her work "cheek," by which, presumably, he meant "chic," and he urged, truthfully, doubtless, that the higher value she set on herself the higher her services would be prized.

"Make a compliment of taking their money," said Mr. Vance, "and they'll give it all the more readily," which doubtless was sound advice, if only Bitha could have made up her mind to act

upon it.

Her first friends had somehow got out of her reach. She went no more to Queen's Gate. From time to time she heard from Cynthia, who apparently knew nothing of the rupture between her mother and Bitha. Cynthia said nothing of coming home. People were saying that there was more wrong with William Orme than mere fatigue, but the talk did not reach Bitha's ears, living, as she did, remote from the world, with a sense of looking on at it from the point of view of one who served its pleasures.

The Duke and Duchess had gone at the end of March with their children to Algiers, to be near the Dowager Duchess, who was slowly recovering from her illness. Mary Bosanquet was in India. People who knew her well said that she felt pushed out by the engagement of the brother she adored, adding that there was no great sympathy between her and Rosamund Orme.

The absence of these friends, coupled with her father's long holiday—he and Vasari were cruising in the Mediterranean by this time—made Bitha very lonely. Only now and again at intervals, but unfailingly, came flowers and books from Geoffrey Pendray, and at Easter a wonderful box of sweets from the young Duchess, with a string of barbaric beads from the Dowager, which pleased Bitha more than Cynthia's jewels had ever done.

The time of the daffodils and primroses was over. The wall-flowers and narcissi had taken

their place in the London barrows. That strange season of beauty had come to London town which, while it lasts, has a poignancy all its own.

Bitha's heart lifted to God in thankfulness for the straight green flame of the young poplars in the London squares. The trees that never sleep the year long, because they are in lamplight through the dark hours, put on a sudden fairy loveliness of most delicate green upon black branches that would have delighted a Japanese artist. Slim pear trees were out in white in the London gardens, and when Bitha made a lonely expedition into the country beyond London she was heart-gladdened by the lovely apparition of the cherry trees, all in white against a world of palest green.

The beauty comforted her heart after the dark winter, while she remembered the march of the trees upon the lake at Castle O'Grady, the pale beauty of the avenue of beeches, the primroses that ran like a foam over the grass; the thick bushes of white and pink May that would now be budding. Forget-me-not in a flower-girl's basket made her sick with longing for the thick beds of white and pink and blue forget-me-not under the low apple trees at Castle O'Grady, and, side by side with them, regiment upon regiment of clove-pinks, thickly

white, and the wall-flowers in every shade of gold and tawny and brown and murrey.

She was very busy in these days—too busy to feel as lonely as she must else have felt. When she came home there was always Chris to welcome her with a broad smile, and Patsy to leap upon her in ecstasies as though the joy of seeing her again was almost more than the dog's little leaping heart could endure.

Then one day she had a new care. The east wind had been blowing for days, though it was hardly noticeable to the robust for the warm haze, and Chris had a cough. Moving about in the little kitchen, singing snatches of songs to herself, she coughed between the snatches, and Bitha heard her and was suddenly aware that Chris had been coughing for some time past. When Bitha had asked her if she had a cold she had replied airily that it was just the oul' fog and smoke that was lodged in her throat.

But as she came in with the tea-tray Bitha had a shocked realization that Chris had grown very thin. There were hollows in her cheeks. Her eyes were sunken: her shoulder-blades in the black dress showed up sharply. What had Bitha been about not to have noticed before?

"You are not well, Chris?" she said, with sharp anxiety.

"'Tis only my food don't seem to agree with me, Miss Bitha," said Chris cheerfully.

"You look half-starved. What have you

been eating?"

"I've lots to eat and drink, Miss Bitha. 'Tis only that I fancy nothin' but the cup o' tay."

"You've been living on tea."

"'Tis the handiest thing to get ready. I'm takin' a turn agin it now."

Bitha stared at her, feeling a sense of guilt. Of course it was Tempe. Tempe, that whited sepulchre of dampness and badly-laid drains. She herself was out at work part of almost every day, but Chris was always in the house.

She made a quick resolve. Papa must not return to Tempe. She had found a letter as she came in which talked of his return.

She made a hasty calculation. She had about a hundred and fifty pounds in the bank. She had been spending very little money on herself, and since she had nearly all her meals at the houses of her employers, the household bills had been infinitesimal. She had enough to go on with and to give Chris a holiday. Tempe must be given up. She remembered that the Sisters of Bethlehem had a holiday home for girls at Bognor. Chris would find her own countrywomen there, and she had no doubt

that the nuns would receive Patsy, with whom they had all fallen in love when the little dog came with Bitha to visit them.

She took Chris down to Bognor next day, having ascertained that there was a vacancy, and leaving her and Patsy on the sea's edge, in the sunshine of an old garden in which fruit and flowers were mingled, she went back to town. For herself Tempe must suffice for a few days longer, till she could find another lodging. Perhaps, if she waited for Papa's return she might take a holiday, May and June being over and people going out of town. They might accept Mrs. Paul Potter's often-repeated invitation to spend as many weeks as they cared to at Castle O'Grady. The good lady had apologized for the invitation, referring to it as "some cheek" to ask people to their own house.

As the hart pants after the water-springs, Bitha longed for Castle O'Grady, even though the birds would be done singing and the cuckoo calling: though the fairy-like green of the trees would have given way to summer darkness; and the great descending rains from the Atlantic would have broken up the wide spaces of the sky and the bogs.

At the thought of the rains Bitha lifted her head as though she sniffed the sweetness of them from afar. She was parched with the hot sun and the east wind. She could understand Chris's wasting, she said to herself. The Westerner needed the rain and the long sweep of it over the bogs and mountains: they needed the grey skies and the wet pastures and the running streams and the bog-pools. She had a free afternoon, and she thought that she had better go to Queen's Gate and let Aunt Alice know that she was about to give up Tempe, and that she did not any longer require the furniture which had come in from the local shop. She wanted Aunt Alice's instructions as to what was to be done with it.

The furniture had suffered a sea-change through the short period of their using it. Like the house, it had deteriorated rapidly. She had an amused alarm as to what Aunt Alice might say when the deterioration was reported to her by Messrs. Cheape and Quicke.

It was her first visit to Queen's Gate for some months, and she had intended it to be a very formal one. But when she arrived, Simmons, who departed from his official dignity so far as to say, "Very pleased to see you again, Miss," volunteered the information that Sir William and Miss Cynthia had returned. Sir William was in his office. Miss Cynthia, he thought, had gone out; and her Ladyship was "layin' down with an 'eadache."

There was something in the man's manner which conveyed that he had more to impart if he would.

Although Bitha had screwed up her courage to the point of an interview with Lady Orme, she could not help feeling immensely relieved that she was spared it. Uncle William was quite another matter. She would be very glad to see him again.

She turned blithely in the direction of the long narrow corridor down which, abutting on the servants' regions, was the room which her uncle called his office, in spite of his wife's objection to the title.

Simmons coughed and said:

"You'll find a sad change in your Uncle, Miss."

" Oh!"

Bitha looked at the man with wide eyes of alarm.

"He is not very ill, Simmons?" she said, and her face told her concern.

"I thought I'd better prepare you, Miss. You'll see for yourself 'ow he's fallen away. I should say there was trouble weighin' on his mind. I've been a long time in 'is service, Miss. 'Er Ladyship,—she don't seem to notice nothink."

Bitha went on to find Uncle William with a

sinking heart. He had been good to her and she was very fond of him. She opened the door gently, afraid of what she was going to see.

"It is Bitha, Uncle," she said.

"Oh, it is Bitha." His voice was very weary but there was pleasure in it. "Come in, Bitha. I am very glad to see you, child."

It was a bare and somewhat cheerless room looking out over low roofs, with glass lights in them, at the back. There was a bright fire burning which took away from the cold plainness of the room that had nothing of comfort about it, nothing to tell that someone had thought of the man who used it and tried to make it pleasant for him.

"Sit down there, Bitha, and tell me all the news," he said, and pulled a chair for her to the fire. "Sit where I can see your face. You are like a June rose, child. Where do you get such glowing cheeks."

"I have walked from Fulham, Uncle."

"Oh, Fulham! How are you getting along there? Your father, I hear, is away yachting with Vasari. Nice for him! I haven't had a holiday for twenty years till this one the doctors imposed on me. I've been lying out in the sun, twiddling my thumbs—and content to do it, mind you, content to do it. It has

made me fit. A man needs to be fit to handle a business like mine."

He certainly did not look fit. His frock-coat hung on him as though it had been made for a much bigger man. His cheeks were furrowed: his colour, sallow and spotty. He tapped nervously with his fingers on the side of his chair. What was Aunt Alice about not to see the change in him?

"I've been getting it hot, Bitha," he said. "Getting it hot from the domestic ruler. Not only have I been idling disgracefully but I've been allowing Cynthia and Cecil Egerton to meet, and get engaged to each other."

He looked at Bitha with a whimsical humour in his gaze, which she found rather pathetic.

"Cynthia was sent to me to keep the lovers divided. It didn't work and I'm glad it didn't. I like the boy. He'll go into the business and give up East Africa. He'll help to pull Orme's out of the mire, and I shan't lose Cynthia. We've learned to be good comrades. I didn't know the stuff Cynthia had in her."

He looked at Bitha with a half-humorous.

half-appealing eye.

"I've been saying imprudent things, Bitha,eh?" he said. "Lucky Alice wasn't here. You'll keep a still tongue in your head. Orme's will weather the storm, you'll see. Not my wife's way. She thinks to hurry the Bosanquet marriage so that the Bosanquets will have an interest in pulling Orme's out of the fire. I don't care if Edward Bosanquet doesn't marry Rosamund. I can't imagine what they see in each other. Cynthia's a good girl—a good, manly girl. Why hadn't I a soft little daughter like you?"

So—there were business troubles. That was what ailed Uncle William. She hoped they were not serious, but—they must be serious to make Uncle William look so ill as all that.

CHAPTER XXII

LOVERS COME TOGETHER

Most of the people "in the know" were aware that "Orme's" was in difficulties. The question was whether, now that old Orme had weathered the stroke, or whatever it was, and was at the helm again, things would have a chance of righting themselves.

The preparations for Rosamund's marriage were being pushed on apace. Lady Orme was entirely immersed in them. It was going to be a very smart wedding—St. George's, Hanover Square—two or three titled bridesmaids, the heir to an Earldom for page, and the breakfast to be done by Gunthers.

Did she know? Bitha asked herself, looking on at all this preparation in wonder. She was inclined to think that Aunt Alice did not know, and still the wedding was being hastily pushed on. Sometime, when it was over and done with, Cynthia was going to marry the young man to whom Lady Orme referred as her daughter's "pauper," modestly, as befitted such a marriage.

It would be a very quiet wedding, with just Bitha for bridesmaid and no such great doings as there were to be for Rosamund. Cynthia was buying her trousseau herself, a good, matter-of-fact sensible trousseau. She was perhaps a little disappointed that it was not to be East Africa, after all. She had been much more interested in her guns and the fit of her riding habit and her new saddle than in the more feminine things. But she looked radiantly happy all the time, while her more favoured sister sulked and quarrelled with her lover.

Bitha had given up Tempe and returned the gim-crack furniture to the local furnishing shop, to the intense indignation of Lady Orme, who, receiving a very small cheque from Messrs. Cheape and Quicke, objected, and was reminded by the enterprising tradesmen that she had paid for poor stuff and it was only to be expected that she should get it.

Bitha had been wondering where she should lay her head when a chance meeting with the Duchess one lovely May morning solved the difficulty for her.

The Duchess, looking more like a rose than it seemed possible a woman could look, encountered Bitha in a West-End shop and carried her home to lunch. A question or two elicited the tale of Bitha's homeless condition.

"But, my child," said the Duchess, "we have more rooms than we know what to do with. Poky bedrooms, as you know, but you can have your pick. I am using the place as a pied-à-terre from which to get some dancing. The Duke won't dance and he won't lead the London life, so he and the children are in Scotland and very happy together. My husband is always happy with his children and dogs and books, and with his mother. I can't imagine how he and such a flibbertigibbet as I came together. You shall have a garret, my dear-all the bedrooms are garrets in those great houses—but you shall have it to yourself with peace and quietness, for I propose to dance all night and sleep all day before returning to dull domestic joys."

So Bitha was lodged in Park Lane, to the amazement of her Aunt Alice who, after questioning Bitha minutely as to whether it was not a merely professional lodging, expressed open surprise as to why the Duchess should trouble about Bitha. Finally she arrived at a decision. It was charity, pure and simple, and it was the fashion for fine ladies like the Duchess—who was barely on Lady Orme's visiting list

and did not recognise her when they met to be charitable when it cost them nothing.

Colonel O'Grady was in town for one or two days on his way through to Ireland. He had a simple happiness in going back to a place where every man, woman and child would rejoice on seeing him, where Mr. and Mrs. Paul Potter, despite their lavish expenditure, would count as nothing against the O'Gradys, who were "broken out of it." Bitha finally had let him go alone. She might join him later perhaps, when the last of the fine folk were gone out of town and her work had ended for the time being, although the joy of going would hardly compensate her for the desolation of coming back.

"You shall see me in my dressing-gown and slippers," the Duchess had warned Bitha.

It was not literally true. The Duchess came home with the milk in the morning but she was generally up by lunch-time, and she entertained her friends quietly at small luncheon and dinner-parties. Sometimes she cried off a dance and took Bitha to a theatre instead, and sometimes Bitha went with her to a dance and enjoyed herself thoroughly.

There came an evening when the Duchess decided on the rare pleasure of staying at home. There was a cold snap to pinch the opening

roses and chill the nightingale's song. The Duchess had ordered a fire in her boudoir, had given instructions that no one was to be admitted, and had put off her dinner dress for a loose wrap of geranium-pink satin, trimmed with white fur, in which she looked adorable. From the depths of an easy chair she gazed across at Bitha, like a sleepy rose.

"Do you mind talking?" she asked.

"I should love it," said Bitha, looking up from her book.

"I can't read to-night," said the Duchess petulantly. "I hate the modern novel. It kills pure romance. Here goes Mr. Bates."

She flung her novel from her, and it fell on the leaves, which partly opened and supported it like a ground-tent.

"Doesn't it look as though it protested, nasty thing!" said the Duchess and laughed, curling herself deeper into the chair.

Her next speech startled Bitha, though they had been growing intimate since they had been housed together.

"What do you think of us?" she asked, and lifted her hand before Bitha could attempt to answer the odd question.

"Don't be conventional, Bitha," she said. "I want to know really what you think of usof the Duke and myself. Are we not an illassorted couple? I have no understanding of his tastes, nor has he of mine. I think his books and politics dull—because I am shut out of them. He thinks me a fribble. He ought to have married his cousin, Edith Lester. She was just the mate for him, if I had not intervened. We make the best of it, but we are an ill-assorted couple."

Bitha remembered what Geoffrey Pendray had said, that the Duke and Duchess were drifting apart, had drifted apart. She had heard others say it since, less kindly.

"He thinks he wearies you," said Bitha, and had no time to think of her own temerity. "He thinks he is too old for you and too serious—that he did you a wrong in marrying you."

The Duchess got up from her luxurious attitude and leaped at Bitha, her cheeks suddenly flaming.

"How do you know that, Bitha?" she asked. "How do you know that? Did he say that to you?"

"He said some of it and some of it I must have understood," Bitha answered. "It was the afternoon of the ball, when I was tired out and had fallen asleep in the library. I woke up to find him standing there waiting patiently till I should wake. You know I did not know who he was except that twice he had come to my help in need. He looked very tired, like a tired knight: those nuns he took home through the fog would have said he was a tired angel. The room was in firelight and it was very quiet. He talked of you and how beautiful you were, and he said his hair was grey and he was too serious, and you were radiantly young, at least I think he said all that. I understood other things—that he was unhappy because he could not share your enjoyments. It was a queer hour that with the firelight playing on the books and the bookcases and his face in shadow. I can hardly tell now how much he said and how much I understood."

The Duchess laughed, a little unsteadily.

"You are *simpatica*, my child,—do I not know it? All the same I think you understood too much, or you dreamt it."

Suddenly her whole expression changed and tears came into her eyes.

"If I could believe it!" she sobbed. "If I could believe it, that I was any use to him instead of a hindrance. It was he who told me to go and dance, he who arranged for my going when I would have stayed at home; he who sent me from him when I would have stayed. Why, it is not so long ago—one night—I was going out—and I was miserable about it. He had been looking careworn and sad.

When I was dressed, even to my cloak and the car at the door, I turned back and ran down the corridor to the library. He looked up as I came in and smiled in his kind cold way. 'May I stay, Hugo?' I asked. 'No, dear,' he said, 'Go.' I felt that I could never ask him again. Oh, he ought to have married Edith Lester."

"He thought you were staying for his sake," said Bitha.

"I wanted to stay for my own," said the Duchess, drying her eyes. "Since then I have danced more than ever."

A day or two later Bitha came back to Park Lane to find luggage piled in the hall.

"Someone has come?" she said to the butler.

"His Grace has returned, Miss."

The Duchess was at Hurlingham. She was dining out and going on to a dance, and Bitha had intended to spend the evening at Queen's Gate. She was not happy about things there. Her uncle had gone back to business, but he hardly seemed fit for it. Cynthia too was perturbed: and Jim, before going back after his Easter holidays, had confided to Bitha's sympathetic ear his anxiety over his father's changed looks.

"I want to go into the business, Bitha," he said. "But, Dad won't hear of it. Oxford

and the diplomatic service, he thinks, will suit me far better. I stick to it that I want to go into the business. Dad has too much on his shoulders..."

"If you continue to want it badly I'm sure your father will give in," said Bitha

comfortingly.

"Oh, Bitha, you are no end of a brick. You think he really will?" the lad asked gratefully. "There will be room for Cecil and me too. Cecil is no end of a good sort."

But now, she was uncertain about her plans. The Duke might want her to do something for him. She had pleased him immensely once or twice by her flair for politics and her intelligent interest in other subjects near his heart. Only yesterday the Duchess had suggested again that Bitha should go with them to Scotland for August and September.

"You can put in an hour or two daily doing secretarial work for the Duke, if you like," she said. "He says you are a splendid secretary, and Miss Hodge has just left to be married. She tortured Hugo with her accent and her speech. 'Right-O!' she said, when he asked her to do something. Not very serious, but Hugo is sensitive."

"I shall have to say 'Right-O!' to him when I do his secretarial work," said Bitha laughing—and the Duchess had replied that it wouldn't matter with her accent.

A little later, the Duke asked her help. He wanted a *précis* made. Did Miss O'Grady know how to make a *précis*? Bitha thought she could do it under his instructions.

Tea was brought to the library where they were working. They had to put by the matter in hand while they had tea, and they talked. The Duke was very full of the children, who were enjoying themselves in Scotland with their grandmother, now almost fully recovered from her illness.

"They let me go," he said wistfully, "only on condition that I should bring back their mother. My wife will not like to be detached from London in the Season."

"Do you think she will care?" asked Bitha, greatly daring.

"She will hate it," replied the Duke. "She dances beautifully. Have you seen her dance?"

He went on, without waiting for Bitha's answer.

"She would come if she knew the children wanted her," he said, as though he talked to himself. "She is very sweet—the Duchess. Not so long ago she came in here on her way to a dance looking most beautiful, and she asked if she might stay—pitying my lonesome-

ness, no doubt. Of course I told her to go. The room looked so dark when she had gone." "She wanted to stay," said Bitha.

The Duke stared at her as though he had forgotten she was there, and Bitha grew very red.

"Please forgive me," she said humbly, but she told me so. She always wants to stay. It is you who send her out to the dances. She thinks that you do not want her to stay, that she hinders you."

The Duke continued to stare at her in a helpless way. Before he could speak, the door opened and the Duchess stood on the threshold.

"May I come in, Hugo?" she asked in a fluttering voice. "I had no idea you were coming. Am I interrupting?"

"Interrupting!" repeated the Duke in a voice which brought something into Bitha's throat. "My beautiful lady!"

He went towards the door and the young Duchess ran to him.

Bitha slipped away by another door without having finished her tea. She was quite sure she was not wanted.

CHAPTER XXIII

BITHA HAS THREE JOYS

AT Queen's Gate Bitha found everything in confusion. Simmons's face as he admitted her was portentous. Trouble was in the air. Bitha soon discovered its nature from Cynthia, who had come in close behind her. Rosamund and Edward Bosanquet had quarrelled finally—and the engagement was broken off. It was understood that Edward Bosanquet had applied to be transferred to a regiment serving abroad. Rosamund was in her room, weeping and raging. According to Cynthia, Mamma was unapproachable, and the cook—an excellent cook, but of a peppery temper—had given notice.

Cynthia's private opinion was that the engagement was well off. Edward Bosanquet's temper was not likely to stand the strain of Rosamund's exactions.

"But, of course, at this late date, with the wedding presents arriving and the invitations out and the bride's dress home, it is uncommonly awkward," said Cynthia. "I suggested to Ma that the things might be transferred to me, but she answered that they would not suit the station in life I had chosen to occupy, and threatened to box my ears as well, so I beat a hasty retreat. Don't you want your tea? I do. Come into the old schoolroom and I'll ask Simmons to bring us tea there, so that we needn't run the risk of meeting Ma."

They were at tea, in the room off the hall which had once been the schoolroom and was now a little book-room, when they heard a latch-key turned in the hall-door lock, and the opening and closing of the door.

"Let's have Papa in here," said Cynthia. "I shouldn't choose tea in the drawing-room myself to-day, of all days in the year."

Sir William came in with Cynthia, looking even wearier than when Bitha had last seen him. He sat down with a sigh on the chair Cynthia had placed for him, and held his hands to the fire. The untimely cold snap showed no sign of departing.

Bitha noticed how thin his hands were, and how bent his shoulders. Cynthia had gone off to ask for fresh tea. He smiled up at Bitha and the smile hurt her.

[&]quot;You've heard about the rumpus, Bitha?"

he asked. "I'm glad of it. Rosamund will find someone else. I couldn't put up the money I was expected to put up. Orme's is in a very bad way—a very bad way, Bitha."

"Oh, Uncle William, I am very sorry," said Bitha, putting an arm about his shoulder.

"So am I, Bitha. You can't imagine your Aunt Alice in a small house with one servant, can you? She won't like it. Jim will have to come home and work. And poor Rosamund—she won't like it either. I've always tried to keep my women-folk above the cares and anxieties of business—they're not prepared, poor souls?"

He smiled up at her again—a very sad smile.

"You don't know anyone who would put fifty thousand pounds into Orme's, do you, Bitha?" he asked. "There's lots of money going, but those who have it to invest don't like the security. All the same it would give new life to me if but I could get it. And I would pull Orme's out of the ditch,—if only I had the money and the time."

"Oh, Uncle William, if only I could help," cried Bitha.

Suddenly Lady Orme was in the room. If she had been uncontrolled earlier in the day, as Cynthia had suggested, she was now apparently controlled. "I did not know Bitha was here," she said.

"I am going at once, Aunt Alice," Bitha said, nervously.

"Let her stay," said Sir William, stretching his hands to the fire, "she has been comforting me, Alice."

Lady Orme looked at her husband in a strange startled way.

"Are you not well, William?" she asked.

"I have not been well for a long time," he answered.

Lady Orme turned most unexpectedly to Bitha.

"You had better stay awhile," she said, "your uncle wishes it."

Her voice shook as she said it. Cynthia came back at this moment.

"Look after your father, Cynthia," Lady Orme said, in the new frightened voice. "I am taking away Bitha for a little while."

Bitha followed her upstairs, wondering. The afternoon sun came through the window at the head of the staircase, dazzling in their eyes, showing up the pictures on the wall, the deep rich colours of the carpets,—the whites and blues and greens and pinks of the masses of flowers that were banked at the head of the staircase in preparation for a dance.

Lady Orme led the way into her own private room. When she had closed the door behind them she turned to Bitha.

"Are my eyes deceiving me, Bitha," she asked, or is your uncle very ill?"

Bitha answered her straight. It seemed to her that all this sparing and deceiving of the women had been a bad kindness.

"He is very ill, Aunt Alice," she said.

Lady Orme put her hand to her head and Bitha, forgetting her old animosities, felt a sudden rush of pity for the woman whose world was falling in ruins about her, and she so little prepared for it.

"It is just worry, Aunt Alice," she said

gently. "He is worrying about you."

"About me," said Lady Orme.

"He has business worries. He thinks you will not be able to bear them."

"Business worries!"

Lady Orme's voice and her expression showed an immense relief. "Only that! I thought I was going to lose him!"

"If I were you, Aunt Alice, I should go to him and ask him to tell you everything. An unshared trouble is a double trouble. Make him tell you everything."

Lady Orme looked at her in amazement.

"I haven't been very kind to you, Bitha

O'Grady," she said. "I don't like your country or your people, and I began with a prejudice. Yet I feel you are giving me sound, honest advice. I am sorry for the past. I can't say more than that."

"Oh, Aunt Alice, don't talk about it, please," said Bitha with a sudden moisture in her eyes. It seemed terrible that Aunt Alice, who had always been so cold and so sure of her own righteousness, should be humiliating herself to a girl like Bitha. "I am sure everything will come right. Only just go and comfort him and ask him to tell you everything. He needs comfort and support."

"It seems to me," said Lady Orme, going towards the door and looking back at Bitha, "that he has given you more of his confidence

than he ever gave me."

"He did not want you to be worried about business matters," said Bitha eagerly: but Lady Orme was gone.

As there did not seem to be any probability of her being needed further Bitha thought she might as well go back to Park Lane; unless Uncle William needed her no one did in that perturbed, disturbed household. But just as she was going Cynthia came into the room, with a scroll in her hand.

"Here are the names of the wedding-guests,"

she said. "We've got to write and put them off. Are you going to help, Bitha? I have a thousand and one things to do."

Bitha immediately sat down again. Of course she was ready to help. She had really nothing to do when she returned to Park Lane beyond writing a long letter to Papa, telling him the whole sorrowful story of Uncle William's trouble. Papa would be so sorry to hear and so sad at not being able to help.

Eventually she stayed for dinner. The house seemed settling down out of the disorder it had worn when she came. When she went downstairs before dressing for dinner-Cynthia had made a point of their all dressing for dinner, to keep the flag flying, as she put it-with a great bundle of letters for the post-box in the hall, she met Lady Orme coming out of the schoolroom, closely followed by Sir William.

There was no one in the hall but themselves, and Cynthia's Shawn, who had come racing downstairs after Bitha forgetting that it was his duty to efface himself.

"I've taken your advice, Bitha," said Lady Orme, "and I thank you for it."

"She is a trump," said Sir William, and the lean anxiety of his face seemed to have passed away or at least to have lifted. "I wish I had been franker with her all these years."

Bitha appeared at dinner in a Parisian frock of white spotted with silver which had been Cynthia's. A change of heart had certainly happened in Lady Orme. She lifted the lorgnette to look at Bitha when they met in the drawing-room and Bitha trembled, but Lady Orme merely remarked that the frock suited Bitha better than it had ever suited Cynthia.

Cecil Egerton, Cynthia's young man, as Rosamund had called him scornfully, appeared at the dinner table, rather to Bitha's surprise. Lady Orme was quite amiable to him, and it was plainly to be seen that Sir William liked him better than he had ever liked his other prospective son-in-law. The two men stayed behind in the dining-room when the ladies left. Everything had gone on just as though there was no disturbance or trouble in the house. Rosamund had not appeared: but Bitha, glancing round at the people talking quietly, the shaded lights, the beautiful silver and glass and napery, the flowers, the soft-footed deft servants, asked herself if any one could have thought of all the trouble that lay behind?

She returned to Park Lane to find the Duke and Duchess still at dinner. They sent her a message to join them in the Duchess's boudoir just as she had concluded the long letter to

Colonel O'Grady in which she told him of the Orme troubles. Apparently things had been drifting towards bankruptcy, which could not be much longer staved off, unless the money was found, but who was going to put fifty thousand pounds into a breaking and tottering business?

She posted her letter in the box in the hall before going on to the Duchess's boudoir, where the Duke lay full length in a long chair, wearing an air of blissful comfort, and the Duchess worked at a pink silk quilt she was embroidering, seated on the floor in the midst of the billowing silk and the embroidery-skeins.

"We are going to chuck London, Bitha," said the Duchess joyously, "and join the children and mamma in Scotland. I've been telephoning all over the place. Such barefaced stories!—and Hugo and I are going to catalogue the books at Dunness. They are crying out to be done. Will you come with us, Bitha?"

"If I may help with the books," said Bitha, "and if you really want me."

She had a little misgiving when she said it. Papa was safely bestowed at Castle O'Grady, where Mrs. Paul Potter and her guests found him "just immortal and a perfectly lovely fellow." But the trouble at Queen's Gate! Bitha hardly liked the idea of enjoying herself in Scotland while there was so much trouble.

She excused herself early and, going out, found a couple of letters for herself and one for her father on the hall table. They had come by the night-post. One of her letters was from Geoffrey Pendray. The other, from Papa, felt nice and bulky.

She carried the letters upstairs and, having switched on the light in the room, sat down at her writing-table. There was a smell of new hay in the room. They were cutting the grass of the Park. The fragrance brought her a sickness of longing for Castle O'Grady. "As the hart pants after the fountains of water."

She re-addressed her father's letter. There was still time for it to catch the night post. Turning it over she saw on the flap: "Mr. John Mackenzie, Burlington Street, W."

It was the famous publisher, to whom after several refusals Colonel O'Grady had daringly sent *The Good Years*. Bitha's heart leaped. From the other publishers the MS. had come back as a parcel.

Might she? Might she not? She was sure Papa would not mind.

She tore open the letter. Mr. Mackenzie would be pleased to undertake the publication

of Colonel O'Grady's book and had the pleasure of enclosing a formal agreement to be signed by Colonel O'Grady, if he approved.

A paragraph or two followed in which Mr. John Mackenzie laid aside the professional aloofness to give a portion of the reader's report on the book, adding that the firm which had published all the great men of its time looked forward with peculiar pleasure to seeing its imprint on *The Good Years*.

When Bitha had read to the end, she performed a small noiseless dance round about the room. She had to relieve her feelings somehow. When she had come back to the table, where the hours for posting stared her in the face, she realized that if Papa was to get this wonderletter on the morning of the day after to-morrow at Castle O'Grady, it must be posted within the next five minutes. So that meant another going downstairs.

She was so happy and excited about the good news that she could hardly sit still to read her own letters. Her father's was a very thick budget. It was good to have that, all that, to read through. And afterwards there was the letter from Geoffrey Pendray, suggesting probably some expedition into the country or to a theatre. He had been increasingly kind, and London had been much more tolerable since

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he had begun to take her up the river or to the fields once or twice a week.

She opened her father's letter and read:

"Dearest Bitha,—I have strange good news for you. The Board has got the money and the land is sold. It means a hundred thousand pounds to you and me, Bitha. What shall we do with it, my girl? It means Castle O'Grady, if you are ready to come back."

As for Geoffrey Pendray's letter,—that was Bitha's third joy.

CHAPTER XXIV AND LAST

They went back to Castle O'Grady in the autumn of that year. Colonel O'Grady, whose book was out and delighting the good critics, had not returned to London, but had settled down happily with the Paul Potters, who delighted in him and were up in arms when he

made any suggestion of going.

The dispossession of the Paul Potters had been a matter of much discussion between Colonel O'Grady and Bitha. Mrs. Paul Potter's idea was that they should stay on and that Bitha and Colonel O'Grady should be a sort of permanent guests. The matter was settled finally by Mr. Potter being appointed on the staff of one of the most brilliant of ambassadors, an appointment which necessitated residence in a foreign capital.

Bitha, before this happy ending had come in sight, while she waited, had spent the Summer with the Duke and Duchess and their children in the Western Islands. Chris had gone home

to Castle O'Grady, where a servant more or less never mattered: and she had taken Patsy with her to wait at home for her mistress, solaced by the reassuring presence of Bitha's Papa and the sight of familiar persons and things. Patsy, being very wise, knew that Bitha would come again, and kept her little heart warm with the thought; but sometimes she would listen for a foot and sometimes a thought would strike her that perhaps if she ran to the ever-open hall door and looked down the avenue, she might see Bitha coming.

Bitha meanwhile was looking on at the happiness of friends who had become very dear to her, who had the strange delusion that she had saved their happiness for them when they were foolishly throwing it away. So fixed was this belief in their minds that they could not do enough for Bitha.

When she came South again it was on her way home: and the country was full of the Autumn and the songs of the robins. In London already the leaves had begun to drift down from the trees, and there was a crispness under Bitha's feet as she walked over the dead leaves by the Park on her way to Queen's Gate, that told of frost overnight.

London was beautiful with the warm russet colour of the oaks in the Park and the blue

mists under the trees; but Bitha's mind saw another vision. She saw Castle O'Grady, grey and old, with all its little windows like old kind eyes under penthouse brows, and overhead the wide sky and the distant blue of the mountains; and the trees in all their Autumn splendours trooping down to the lake-side where the sedge and the bracken were rust colour and the whole place was alive with the piping of the snipe and the rattle of the water-hens.

She was not without knowledge of how things had been going at Queen's Gate. Cynthia had married Cecil Egerton two months ago, and had settled down at home instead of going to East Africa. Orme's was on its feet again, thanks to the fifty thousand pounds dropped into it—quite against the advice of practical business men-by Colonel O'Grady: and there was room for a younger and more energetic man in the control than William Orme would ever be again: so his son-in-law had taken an important position instead in his father-inlaw's business, where later Jim perhaps might also find a place. Cynthia had been content to give up her dreams of a wild free life and a new country for a cottage at Hindhead with a hundred acres of gorse and moor, over which she could gallop and walk, persuading herself that she was in the new country. After allas she wrote to Bitha—it was good to be near Papa, and to see him coming back to renewed life and vigour and the promise of a hale old age; and to feel that Cecil had proved himself capable and trustworthy as she had always known him to be.

Rosamund had gone out to visit a relative in India, so had escaped the mortification of her broken engagement and the knowledge that her late fiancé had, with disgraceful haste according to Lady Orme, married the daughter of a Devonshire vicar, to whom he was devoted. She, being so sweet a creature that by no possibility could she rouse his violent temper, the omens for the marriage were all propitious. Further, Mary Bosanquet was home from her travels, was devoted to her sister-in-law, and, a placid witness of her brother's happiness.

"It might have been harder on Mary if Rosamund had not come first," Cynthia had written.
"Now she will make an adorable maiden aunt,

if she does not slip into a sisterhood."

Bitha was received at Queen's Gate with open arms by her uncle and a chastened cordiality by her aunt. She had found the two sitting by the fire, a real Darby and Joan. Adversity had certainly brought out the best in Lady Orme.

"I've grown much quieter, Bitha," Lady Orme said, after she had inspected Bitha through her lorgnette and remarked that she was very sunburnt,—but with her complexion it hardly mattered,-"since I've had no daughters to marry off. Have you heard our latest news? Rosamund has become engaged to a Colonel Walcott, whom she met on the boat going outa widower with a married daughter. Quite a sensible marriage—Rosamund was really rather troublesome and difficult; but I've known people who were difficult with all the rest of the world get on quite well with a husband or wife. Jim will come into the business presently: and your uncle and I will go out of London and spend our declining years in the country. It is really very pleasant not to have so many parties, and I found the worthlessness of those worldly friends when we were in trouble. How do you think your uncle is looking, Bitha?"

Bitha, perched on the arm of her uncle's chair, looked down on him affectionately and said that she thought him looking remarkably well.

"I am taking him to the Riviera for the winter," said Lady Orme. "Next winter perhaps he may be strong enough to stay at home. You've been a good niece to him, Bitha. We should have been in a very queer way indeed if you and your father had not stood in the gap."

"Orme's won't swallow up the money, Bitha," her uncle said, his hand pulling out her red curls and letting them fly back to their tight rings again. "It is going to make money for you. What will you do with it?"

"Give it away," said Bitha. "Do good with it. There are thousands of things Papa and I always wanted to do for the people, and never could do. Now we are going to begin."

Cynthia had just come in and heard what Bitha said. "Do it at once, then, Bitha," she said with cynical wisdom. "Do it while you remember your own poverty; else you will grow selfish like all the rich people, and you will not enter the Kingdom of Heaven."

"Bitha's Kingdom of Heaven is within her," said Sir William Orme. "I too have learnt my lesson. Once Orme's is reinstated others will profit by it as well as I."

So Bitha went home, pitying all the poor people in the smoke and fog who were not going home like her. After all, it had been a wonderful year, and so many people were going to be the better for it. She counted its gains,—Uncle William and, yes,—Aunt Alice—and Cynthia, and Cecil and Jim, and Mary and Tom Bosanquet, and the Duke and Duchess and the Dowager,—and—yes, Captain Pendray. Perhaps Captain Pendray was best of all. After all it had been wonderful—Bitha's Wonderful Year.





